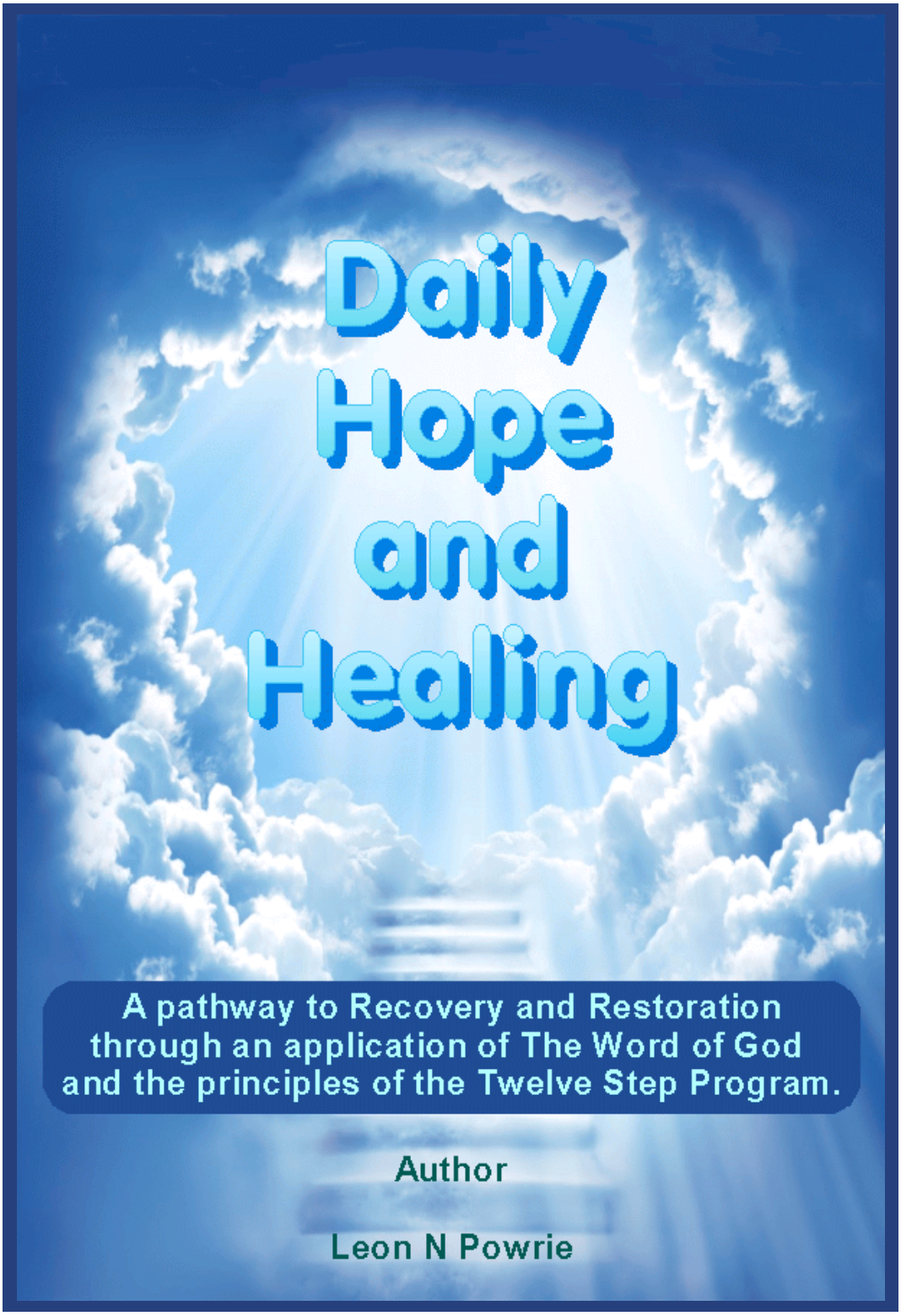
Daily
Hope
and
Healing
A pathway to Recovery and Restoration
through an application of The Word of God
and the principles of the Twelve Step Program.
Author
Leon N Powrie

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Introduction

There is in every human heart the desire or longing for meaning, but the pathway to meaning has many side tracks, and stumbling stones. Then there are those fires of affliction and floods of failure that can easily overwhelm us and frustrate our desire for fulfillment. The author's of *The Seven Longings of the Human Heart*, Mike Bickle with Deborah Hiebert suggest that, "A longing is an ache of the heart. It is a cavity of the spirit crying to be filled." (p.6) The longing of every human heart is for purpose, presence, productivity and peace. Purpose gives us a reason for being. Presence gives us availability for meaningful interaction and service. Productivity gives us the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to life. Peace is the product of unifying, harmonious living in relationship with our Creator, with all creation and our fellow men.

These daily devotionals, as you will see, are grouped into weekly sets with each set focusing on a specific theme taken sequentially from the Hope and Healing lessons. There are fifty-two lessons in all that are divided into four sets of thirteen. Each set is a series and each series covers the twelve steps to Hope and Healing. Each series moves progressively toward wholeness in Christ. The daily devotionals are meant to provide daily support to the theme of the lesson but does not necessarily or intentionally duplicate the lessons content. The relevant lesson is included at the end of each week.

It is my prayer that, as you read these devotionals, they will provide you meaningful guidance, support, encouragement and hope. Please allow the Holy Spirit access to your heart so that each daily thought can be a daily dose of hope and healing for your heart.

Leon N Powrie

(Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references are quoted from the New Living Translation.)

— Week One —

The Debilitating Nature of Despair

"The nearer we come to Jesus, and the more clearly we discern the purity of His character, the more clearly shall we see the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and the less shall we feel like exalting ourselves. There will be a continual reaching out of the soul after God, a continual, earnest, heartbreaking confession of sin and humbling of the heart before Him. At every advance step in our Christian experience our repentance will deepen."

(Ellen G. White, Acts of the Apostles, p.561)

Step 1

We admitted we were powerless over our hurts, habits, addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable.

The Origin of Despair

> "*I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked."* Genesis 3:10

Adam was replying to God's question, "Where are you?" That is a question we all hear too clearly. Where are we in our life's journey? The path of life has traversed many experiences, some with happy endings, others with painful, frightening and even cataclysmic consequences but all impacted by our choices. Adam and Eve made choices that brought them unpleasant, indeed fearful feelings of guilt and shame. The serpent had deceptively and successfully sown seeds of doubt. These doubts quickly grew into distrust, and distrust bore blooms of disobedience. But rather than the sweet scent of success, Adam and Eve could only savor the all pervading stench of guilt and shame.

The natural response to shame is to hide, to cover up, to put on the perfume of pretense. And if that isn't possible, we, like Adam and Eve, try the blame game. "The spirit of self-justification originated in the father of lies; it was indulged by our first parents as soon as they yielded to the influence of Satan, and has been exhibited by all the sons and daughters of Adam. Instead of humbly confessing their sins, they try to shield themselves by casting the blame upon others, upon circumstances, or upon God—making even His blessings an occasion of murmuring against Him." (Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 58).

But the question still comes, "Where are you?" God seeks to engage with us even when we are hiding from Him. Even though there are unavoidable, at times 'naked' outcomes as a consequence of our choices, we can be assured that the One who seeks us is well able to provide us covering.

> "And the LORD God made clothing . . . for Adam and his wife." (Genesis 3:21)

The Pervading Presence of Despair

> "*For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night.*" Psalm 51:3

It was after the prophet Nathan had confronted king David with the murderous actions he had taken to cover his adulterous behaviour with Bathsheba that he wrote the words quoted above (see 2 Samuel 11 and 12). The reality of his rebellion had been exposed through a parable that incited David to condemn himself, to admit guilt and experience shame. Guilt and shame bind us in the prison house of despair. For David, the recognition of his rebelliousness was an ever present reminder of his inescapable fallibility.

David goes on to say, "*Against you, and you alone, have I sinned . . . and your judgment against me is just.*" (Ps. 51:4) It is in acknowledging, in admitting our fallibility, our powerlessness over the past and in our acceptance of the consequences that accrue as a result of our misguided choices, that we take the first step toward healing and release from the prison house of despair.

The first step in twelve step recovery programs states:-

> "We admitted we were powerless over our hurts, habits, addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable."

It was when David was able to recognize that he had a problem and then admit his inability to manage it that he was willing to seek the only sure help for human brokenness, his maker. He uses words like, 'restore', 'renew', 'cleanse', create', 'purify', 'blot out', and 'wash' in his approach to God.

> "Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me." (Psalm 51:7,10)

The Rope of Repentance

> "*Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?*" Romans 2:4

In yesterday's devotion we focused on David's desperate condition. His life was out of control. He had chosen the path of lustful least resistance that led him to arrange the demise of Uriah the Hittite in an attempt to cover his tracks. It took a "Where are you?" moment to jolt him out of his self-destructive path, to acknowledge the naked truth of his infidelity and that he had sunk into a quagmire of his own iniquitous making.

Like a strong rope, there are three basic strands that come together and give saving power to repentance. They are:-

1. The "Where are you?" moment - the moment when we have a true sense of our failures and acknowledge them before God.
2. The "Good News" moment - when our eyes are opened to "*how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is*" and that he is ready to forgive the truly penitent.
3. The "turn around" moment - when we are "sick and tired of being sick and tired" and choose to find healing and rest in God's grace and goodness. We turn from the slippery slope of rebellion and self destruction to the path of unity with God.

Repentance finds realization in the twining of these three elements together. It brings hope and the assurance of healing.

> "O LORD," I prayed, "have mercy on me. Heal me, for I have sinned against you." (Psalm 41:4)
>
> "My wayward children," says the LORD, "come back to me, and I will heal your wayward hearts." (Jer.3:22)

Step By Step

> "*Doesn't he see everything I do and every step I take?*" Job 31:4

Good parents try to keep an eye on their young children lest they stumble and fall, wonder away and get lost, or stray into dangers path. As children, we all too often sought to escape that watchful eye, to do our own thing. We were by nature self-centered rebels wanting our own way. How surprised we were when we found that our parents seemed to have eyes in the back of their heads or could read our actions in our body language and expressions. But God is infinitely more aware.

Elihu, the younger of Job's friends, made this observation, "God watches how people live; he sees everything they do." (Job 34:21) David adds, "He watches everyone closely, examining every person on earth." (Psalm 11:4) And while we might want to hide from God because of our shame or our willfulness, we can be reassured that, like a faithful parent, He monitors our thoughts and actions. He waits for that moment when He can ask the question, "Where are you?" or "What's happening in your life?" He is ever attentive to our walk.

When we turn in repentance toward God, He speaks comfort to us and bids us, "Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life." (Isaiah 55:3) Taking one step at a time we come closer to the one who calls us to turn off the perilous path to self-destruction and into an ever closer walk with Him who is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6), the one who says, ""Stop at the crossroads and look around. Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it. Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls." (Jeremiah 6:16)

> "For he is our God. We are the people he watches over, the flock under his care. If only you would listen to his voice today!" (Psalm 95:7)

At the Crossroads

"*Right behind you a voice will say,* "*This is the way you should go.*"" Isaiah 30:21

At the crossroads of life, we are forced to make a decision as to which way to go. There are three questions that we need to ask ourselves - a 'Where' question, a 'Whose' question and a 'Why' question.

Where do I want to go? A clear destination is desirable. We are not happy with a purposeless, unmanageable existence. We may be tired of wondering in the wilderness of wantonness and self-gratification. Or we may be seeking relief from the pain of a bruised and battered existence, from rejection, worthlessness and abuse. It may be that we want release from a harmful or undesirable habit. Whatever has brought us to this decisive point in our lives, we need a clear objective, an achievable, one step at a time, goal.

Whose directions are we prepared to listen to? Too long we have followed the cacophony of the crowd. Isn't it time to lock into the heavenly GPS - God's Perfect Son? He is the one who says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) He is the one who says, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

Why? What is the underlying motive for our desire to change direction? Paul sets out the purest motive for any action when he said, "Let all that you do be done in love." (1Corinthians 16:14) Unless we are motivated by love for the One who wants to guide us along the true way, and unless we share love with our fellow travellers and value ourselves as we are valued by our divine guide, our choices will fall short of achieving a desirable outcome.

"A wise man will listen and increase his learning, and a discerning man will obtain guidance?" (Pr.1:5 HCSB)

Recognize the Roadblocks - 1

"*These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble.*" John 16:1 NKJV

Our pathway to hope and healing may be strewn with obstacles, pitfalls, triggers and traps that may cause us to stumble. Let us consider the first five of ten roadblocks.

Overreacting (over sensitiveness) - "An offended friend is harder to win back than a fortified city. Arguments separate friends like a gate locked with bars." (Proverbs 18:19) Sensitiveness is a form of pride. Solomon says, "Pride leads to disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom." (Prov.11:2)

Overdoing it (rushing in and burning out) - Jesus saw the dangers of overloading ourselves. When He saw this happening to His disciples He said, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." (Mark 6:31)

Facing frustration - Solomon speaks of the futility of riches and how it can cause frustration, discouragement and anger (see Ecclesiastes 5:13-17). He points out that accepting life's circumstances, and finding joy in living is better than brooding over the past (Vs. 18-20). Many things can frustrate us. What we can do is step back, take a deep breath and calmly evaluate the situation.

Risk taking - Alexander Pope wrote, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." We need to watch against risky and foolish endeavors driven by harmful desires that can lead to loss and ruin. (see 1Timothy 6:9) Jesus says, "And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?" (Mark 8:36)

Old haunts and associates - There is significant danger in peer pressure and old associations. Peter says, "Be on guard so that you will not be carried away by the errors of these wicked people and lose your own secure footing."

"And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself." (Galatians 6:1)

Recognize the Roadblocks - 2

> "*He who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed.*" James 1:6 NKJV

Yesterday we briefly examined five things that can stifle our hope and block our progress toward healing. Now we will consider the final five stumbling blocks to our progress.

Drifting without a reasonable goal - Earlier in the week we found that we need to have a clear objective and an achievable goal. As James points out, there is no direction in doubts. But there can be progress where there is purpose.

Procrastination - That is, putting off making a decision until a more opportune time. Ellen White, one and a half centuries ago, wrote, "Procrastination has been called a thief-the thief of time. I wish it were no worse than a thief. It is a murderer; and that which it kills is not time merely, but the soul." (Advent Review, and Sabbath Herald, Sept. 22, 1863)

Defeatism and Negative thinking - Are we going to be willing losers? Think about Paul's attitude when he was faced with life threatening difficulties. "We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. . . So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you." (2 Cor.4:8-12) Defeat negative thinking with purpose.

Guilt and Shame - Paul, who claimed to be the chief of sinners and who had every reason to be filled with guilt and shame, said, " I serve [God] with a clear conscience." (2 Timothy 1:3). This roadblock is removed when we accept the gracious forgiveness of God proffered to us through Christ.

The fear of failure - Hannah rejoiced in the gift of Samuel, her son and, in her prayer of praise and thanks to God, she said, "a man does not prevail by his own strength." (1 Samuel 2:9) We can declare, " I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:13)

> "So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God." (Heb.4:16)

— Week Two —

So Our Lives Are Unmanageable

"God would have you trust in His love, and be constantly guarding your soul by locking the gate of your thoughts, that they shall not become unmanageable; for when you allow your mind to indulge these thoughts of self-pity, the enemy comes in to suggest the most unkind and unreasonable things in regard to those who would do you good, and only good." (E.G. White, Sons and Daughters of God, p. 298)

Step 1

We admitted we were powerless over our hurts, habits, addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable.

Who Am I?

"*For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children.*" Romans 8:16

The creator God made humanity with a purpose, to be an expression of His own image. He said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us . . . " (Genesis 1:26) The record clearly states that mankind was created in God's image with a clear purpose and responsibility for His creation. In speaking to the men of Athens, Paul clearly states that "we are God's offspring", that "in Him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28-29 NIV)

It is of immense importance that we recognize and accept that there is purpose and reason for our existence, that we were created for God's glory (see Isaiah 43:5-7) and in His glorious image. In one of king David's psalms where he is musing on the glorious majesty of God and the vision of His majesty as revealed in the wonders of the heavens, he reflects on the intended place of humanity in the scheme of things. He declares, "What is man that You remember him, the son of man that You look after him? You made him little less than God [*or* heavenly beings] and crowned him with glory and honor." (Ps.8:4-5 HCSB)

"Who am I", Moses said when God called him to lead Israel out of Egypt. Moses had doubts about his abilities, he was conscious of his failures, he shrank from the commission God was giving him. His excuse was that he wasn't good with words. Putting it bluntly, he thought he was a failure. But God responded by saying, "Who makes a person's mouth . . . " (see Exodus 3 and 4) All too often we lose sight of who we are, that we are precious in God's sight and that he is prepared take us as we are and remake us in His image.

"And the Lord . . . makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image."
(2 Cor.3:18)

I Am Not Worthy

> "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." 1 Cor. 15:9

Of the many paradoxes in the Bible, this statement of Paul's must be one of them. Here is a man revered as a giant in Christendom declaring himself to be the least apostle, indeed one who is unworthy of being a recipient of the appellation. In his second letter to the Corinthians he reiterates this view of himself when he says, "I am not at all inferior to these "super apostles," even though I am nothing at all." (Ch.12:11) Paul was mindful of the fact that he had been a vessel of dishonour and how the master potter had taken the clay of his life and made him into a vessel of honour.

After receiving the message through Nathan the prophet that the Davidic line would continue forever, David prayed to the Lord, "Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?" (1 Chronicles 17:16) It was many years later that David's personal folly with Bathsheba led him to acknowledge his unworthiness. He said, " I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night." (Psalm 51:3)

We too are faced with the enigma of our lives. How often best intentions have been marred or matched by monumental blunders. Like Paul, we cry out, "Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?" But, with him, we too can rejoice, "Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 7:24-25) We then can declare with the hymnist, B.B. Bixler:-

I am not worthy the least of His favor,
But "In the beloved" I stand;
Now I'm an heir with my wonderful Savior,
And all things are mine at His hand.

Why Do I?

> "*So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.*" Romans 7:17

Come on Paul, who are you trying to kid? Isn't this just an irresponsible excuse, or a considered 'cop out'?

Paul's response to our questions is this. "I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong." (V.21) The driving force behind this paradoxical behaviour is the "weakness of [our] human nature" (Rom 6:19) which has been corrupted by sin. So it seems we are motivated by corrupted and twisted desires that find expression in our cravings, addictions, hurtful habits and all consuming compulsiveness.

The Paul Principle is not unlike Murphy's law, 'Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.' James expresses the problem this way. "Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death." (James 1:14-15) And he goes on to say, "What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? " (4:1)

There is but one way to break free from the shackles of our adulterated desires . It is to fall on the mercies of Jesus, the Son of God, take up the cross of commitment and follow Him. He says, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin. A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son is part of the family forever. So if the Son sets [us] free, [we] are truly free." (John 8:34-36 adjusted to the 1st person)

> "So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death."
>
> (Romans 8:1-2)

Oh What a Feeling!

> "*I said, "Oh, the feeling in the pit of my stomach! I writhe in anguish. Oh, the pain in my heart! My heart pounds within me. I cannot keep silent! "*
>
> Jeremiah 4:19 NET

We are led to believe that a fantastic feeling is in store for us if we buy a particular make of automobile. But there are many other kinds of feelings that can fill our basket of experience that do not fall into the 'wow' category. There are the stomach churning, heart flipping, panic button pressing variety that are evidence of a life in distress. Add to these the soul crushing, mentally draining and spirit quenching consequences of failure or fruitless effort. Yes, Oh what a feeling!

Even admitting that we have painful feelings about life's hurts is difficult. And then, there is the frustration that attends our inability to kick those niggling bad habits and addictive or compulsive behaviors. These can so easily drag us into despair. The Apostle Paul understood this feeling when he wrote, "The trouble with me is I am all too human. . . . Oh, what a miserable person I am." (Romans 7:14,24)

But there is another feeling, a sweet solace to those burdened with the pain of a troubled life. "Jesus invites all the weary and heavy laden to come unto him who is meek and lowly in heart, that they may find rest. If [we possess] the humility of [our] Master, [we] will rise above the slights, the rebuffs, and annoyances to which [we are] daily exposed, and they will cease to cast a gloom over [our] spirit. That meekness which Jesus blessed, operates amid the scenes of domestic life; it makes the home happy, it provokes no quarrels, gives back no angry answers, but soothes the irritated temper, and diffuses a gentleness which is felt by all within its charmed circle. It calms the inflammable spirit of retaliation, and mirrors forth the character of Christ." (E.G. White The Spirit of Prophecy Vol. 2, p.206)

The Emotional Roller Coaster

> "*Then Joseph hurried from the room because he was overcome with emotion for his brother. He went into his private room, where he broke down and wept.*"
> Genesis 43:30

The story of Joseph is possibly the most favoured of all Bible stories. When we examine his life, we find that it is marked by patterns of highs and lows, joys and grief, fear and favour. As a youth, he was the favoured son but a despised brother. This situation led to murderous attempts on his life only to be reprieved from that state and sold into a life of slavery. In Egypt, he earned the favour of his master but fled the lustful look of his mistress. He felt the deep despair of imprisonment and isolation only to be thrust into the limelight of fame, success and power. What an emotional roller coaster.

At the peak of his power he again meets family. Old, almost forgotten emotions are stirred. Trust is tested, doubts assuaged and relationships reestablished, but not without a whole range of emotions filling the story with heartfelt meaning. The emotional dynamics of Joseph's life strike a sympathetic and empathetic cord with us. We admire his composure in crisis, his faith when all seemed hopeless, and his compassion for those who had been unkind to him.

Joseph was able to ride the rolling waves of his life's experience because of his confidence in the God of Abraham. We too can find composure in crisis and continue faithful even when faced by the worst fears that life can throw at us. Hang in there. Hold on for the ride.

> "Those who have been ransomed by the LORD will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness." (Isaiah 51:11)

Pie in the Sky

> "*The hopes of the godly result in happiness, but the expectations of the wicked come to nothing.*"
>
> Proverbs 10:28

How many times have we sunk our teeth into some delightful looking treat only to find that it falls far short of our expectations. I remember a time when we selected a rock melon at a market that oozed a fruity fragrance that invited eating. Our expectations were bolstered by the aroma that exuded from the fruit but, alas, we were grossly disappointed. It had no flavour or sweetness at all.

Life's disappointments are heightened by the level of expectation we had for the experience. All too often our expectations are unrealistic. Nothing more than pipe dreams puffing out clouds of hope that quickly dissipate before our very eyes.

"We had hoped he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel", Cleopas told the stranger that had joined him and his friend on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:21 and context). They shared their understanding of the events that had transpired over the previous few days and what they had expected of Jesus, but now all their expectations had been shattered and had transformed into disillusionment and despair. But later that evening as they sat down to eat, one simple act of this stranger (now their guest) reignited their hopes, clarified their expectations and sent them rejoicing back to Jerusalem with a realigned understanding and a clearer, more realistic expectation.

Surely we need a similar realignment of our misguided understanding and an authentic adjustment to our hopes and expectations.

> "Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise."
>
> (Heb.10:23)

Me, Me, and Me

> "*Then he said, "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own.*"
> Luke 12:15

Jesus illustrated this warning with a parable about an apparently successful agriculturalist whose crop yields had increased so significantly that his barns and silos could not contain the harvest. His solution sounds reasonable to us, just upgrade the storage facilities - build bigger and better, then sit back and enjoy. (See Luke 12:16-19) But Jesus ends the parable with these challenging words from God, "You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?"

"In living for self he has rejected that divine love which would have flowed out in mercy to his fellow men. Thus he has rejected life. For God is love, and love is life. This man has chosen the earthly rather than the spiritual, and with the earthly he must pass away." (E.G. White, Christ's Object Lessons, p.258) This quotation closes with a verse from the Psalms which says, "People who boast of their wealth don't understand; they will die, just like animals." (Psalm 49:20.)

"To live for self is to perish. Covetousness, the desire of benefit for self's sake, cuts the soul off from life. It is the spirit of Satan to get, to draw to self. It is the spirit of Christ to give, to sacrifice self for the good of others." (Ibid) It is not what we have in power, possessions, position, prestige or wealth that gives us worth, as some would believe, but it is in living lives of selfless service to others that flows naturally from the heart of those who are filled to overflowing with God's love.

> "And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life." (1 John 5:11, 12)

— Week Three —

Coming to Belief In a Higher Power

"Man cannot transform himself by the exercise of his will. He possesses no power by which this change may be affected. The renewing energy must come from God. The change can be made only by the Holy Spirit. He who would be saved, high or low, rich or poor, must submit to the working of this power."

(E.G. White, In Heavenly Places, p.20)

Step 2

Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

The Surrender of Self

> "*But I am afraid to surrender," the king said, "for the Babylonians may hand me over to the Judeans who have defected to them. And who knows what they will do to me!* " Jeremiah 38:19

King Zedekiah struggled with the message from God given by the prophet Jeremiah. His mind was filled with uncertainty. The Lord had instructed him to surrender to the king of Babylonian. He chose to ignore the message and reaped the consequences that had been predicted.

Jesus made this paradoxical statement, "If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it." (Matthew 16:25) What He asks us to do is 'Let go and let God'.

We may ask, ""How am I to make the surrender of myself to God?" You desire to give yourself to Him, but you are weak in moral power, in slavery to doubt, and controlled by the habits of your life of sin. Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. You cannot control your thoughts, your impulses, your affections. The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you; but you need not despair. What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him." (E.G. White, Steps to Christ, p.47)

Accepting Help

"*Don't be afraid. I am here to help you.*" Isaiah 41:13

Why do we balk at the thought of accepting help? Is it because we want to protect our independence? Would it be an affront to our self-sufficiency? Or is it purely a matter of personal pride? We need to look at the four factors that these questions raise so we can be comfortable in accepting help.

Pride - Pride feeds on success and builds monuments to our reputation. To the proud, accepting help is a humiliating evidence of failure, a devastating blast to those memorials to success. The old proverb says, "Pride goes before a fall" (see Proverbs 16:18) But when we accept help from the Lord we are actually entering into a privileged and glorious partnership.

Self-sufficiency - When we take the big picture into account, we are forced to admit that there are systems and sources in this world that we are entirely dependant on. Paul acknowledges that any sufficiency we have is gifted to us from God. (See 2 Corinthians 3:5)

Independence - We like to think that we have the skills to live life independently of others but in reality we are interdependent and, in some ways, still dependent. There is wisdom in Paul's advice to "Share each other's burdens" (see Galatians 6:2)

Hesitancy - Pride, self-sufficiency and the desire to be independent are roadblocks to our seeking and accepting help from others and from God. Hesitancy shackles us to hurts and hangups of the past.

> "I pondered the direction of my life, and I turned to follow your laws. I will hurry, without delay, to obey your commands." (Psalm 119:59-60)

The Wisdom of Being Willing

"*Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you.*" Psalm 51:12

When a person seeks help for a major health issue that requires surgery, the health team will explain what is involved in the procedure, ask the client for their consent, seek the client's compliance to the pre-operative and post-operative plans and their commitment to the rehabilitative process. In the spiritual sense, we acknowledge that we have a life threatening heart and head problem. The Lord is a superbly competent practitioner who is ready to help us, but without cost. All that is required of us is to give our consent, comply with the pre- and post- plans and make a commitment to the rehabilitative process. The question is, are we willing to have Him help?" Are we willing to consent, comply, and commit?

Consent - In consenting we willingly agree to a proposed procedure that is meant for our good. The Lord is proposing a radical change in our being when He says, "And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart." (Ezekiel 36:26) When we acknowledge the need, accept the solution and agree to the procedure we enter into a trusting submissive state of subjection to the will of God and His purposes for us.

Comply - Before and after any medical procedure there are a number of things to be done or taken that are essential to the success of the procedure. The Lord asks us to turn from our selfish, evil ways, take up our cross and follow His every leading. (see Ezekiel 33:11; Mark 8:34)

Commit - We enter into a covenant with the Master physician. His will is written on the new heart that He seeks to implant in us. "Commit everything you do to the LORD. Trust him, and he will help you." (Psalm 37:5)

No Condemnation

"*So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus."* Romans 8:1

Jesus was teaching in the temple precincts when a group of religious leaders thrust a disheveled woman before him and declared, "This woman was caught in adultery. The law of Moses says such should be stoned, but, teacher, what do you say?" (see John 8:3-5) Jesus didn't answer them but started writing on the ground. Then, in response to the accusers' persistent questions, Jesus said, "Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" (v.7) As Jesus continued writing on the ground the woman's accusers slunk away one by one until none were left. Speaking to the woman, Jesus asked, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" (V.10) When she acknowledged that none were left to condemn her, Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

But for Christ, we all stand condemned. We have all sinned. We all fall short of our creator's expectations. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that He came not to condemn but to save. (see John 3:16-17) He took upon himself the burden of our guilt and shame - our hurts, hangups, addictions and compulsive behaviours - and carried them to the cross. He was condemned so that we can stand uncondemned. But, it is for us to stand before Him and answer honestly when He asks, "Where are your accusers?" We need no other accuser because we acknowledge our own fallen state, we admit our powerlessness over our propensity to sin. We know all too well where we have gone wrong. But He looks us in the eye and with the tenderest compassion He says, "Neither do I condemn you." He died for us, so that we can experience eternal life in Him. Our own self condemnation melts away in the warm rays of His compassion and love. Let's grasp this reprieve and, in response to His love, choose to let go the past and live the future in Him.

He Cares

"*Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.*" 1 Peter 5:7

Peter, the impetuous disciple of Jesus, penned these words for the young men of the early church. Of all the disciples of Jesus, Peter understood the bold, impetuous, impatient and outspoken nature that can be part of the youthful mind. In his exuberance he had chastised Jesus when He told His disciples of His approaching Passion. And when the crunch came, the one who said, "I will never desert you . . . I will never deny you!" is the one who, within a few hours, also said, "I don't even know the man." (see Matt.26:33,35,72) Thrice He denied His Lord and when he recognized what he had done, guilt and shame whelmed up inside him and he was stricken with grief and self condemnation.

Peter had every reason to grieve, to feel he was a hopeless failure. He new his denial had hurt the one who he had declared to be the Son of God. Yet, on the resurrection morn, the angel told the women who came early to the tomb to especially convey the news of Christ's resurrection to Peter. Still Peter didn't understand where he stood in relation to the one he had devotedly followed. It was not until that morning, after a failed night of fishing, when Jesus questioned Peter concerning his love for Him, that Peter recognized the unconditional love and care of His Lord, that he was still accepted as one who would be a fisher of men and a shepherd to the flock of believers. The burden of guilt and shame was lifted. It was in this experience that he began to understand more fully his role as a compassionate and caring apostle of Jesus.

"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Matthew 11:28-29

He Calls

> "*God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful.*" 1 Thessalonians 5:24

There are three elements to this short verse that are worthy of closer consideration. To what are we called? What is to happen? Can God be trusted?

God is Faithful - "Understand, therefore, that the LORD your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unfailing love on those who love him and obey his commands." (Deuteronomy 7:9) He who faithfully sealed the everlasting covenant on the cross is well able, ready and willing to bring about change in our lives.

Our calling - "God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:9 NIV) We are called into unity with the Divine and all those also who are likewise linked by love in the fellowship of Christ. Jesus prayed that our oneness and unity match the unity of Divinity.

The happening - "Now may the God of peace Himself **sanctify you completely**; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be **preserved blameless** at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thessalonians 5:23 NKJV) It is because God is faithful to His covenant that we can be transformed, and are able "to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires." (2 Peter 1:4)

What a calling? Take hold of it and never let it go.

> "Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is." (1 John 3:2)

Come Confidently

> "*Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*"
>
> (Hebrews 4:16 NIV)

A major theme of the book of Hebrews is the High Priestly role of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, in the heavenly temple. It points out that, through the death of Jesus, there is "a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place," (10:20) the very throne room of God. Because Christ was willing to bear the sins of the world (including ours), to experience and conquer death for us, and then to rise victorious from the grave as our Saviour, Mediator and King, that we can stand justified and guiltless before the throne of God and call Him "Father".

This is a privilege to be cherished, guarded and honored. "Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward." (Hebrews 10:35 NKJV) Our confidence is not based on our merit, for we have none. It is totally founded on He who was faithful even unto death and offers to us newness of life now and life everlasting at His coming.

Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, tells of his experience in Asia and how he had expected to die. He says, " we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God." (2 Corinthians 1:9) He goes on to say, "And he did rescue us from mortal danger, and he will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in him, and he will continue to rescue us." (V.10)

Let us take hold of the assurances of our Lord. He is able. He is faithful, in mercy, to rescue us from our faults and failings, our hurts, hangups, bad habits and compulsions and to work a miracle of grace unto salvation in our lives.

> "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth!" (Psalm 121:2)

— Week Four —

Calming The Storm

"Jesus will be the helper of all who will put their trust in him. Those who are connected with Christ have happiness at their command. They follow in the path where their Saviour leads, for his sake crucifying the flesh, with the affections and lusts. These persons build their hope upon Christ, and the storms of life are powerless to sweep them from the sure foundation."
(E.G. White, The Youth's Instructor, Aug.10, 1899)

Step 2
Came to believe that a
power greater than ourselves
could restore us to sanity.

Winds Of Strife

"*Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock.*" Matthew 7:25

The parable of the wise and foolish builders comes at the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a sermon full of instruction about living. In it, we find that both houses are exposed to the same set of circumstances - torrential rain, raging floodwaters and cyclonic winds. The only point of difference is where they built. The events of this parable are vividly illustrated on our TV screens on an almost daily basis as we view the devastation wrought by super storms and floods that afflict so many communities world wide. It matters little that the house has been built to withstand the wildest of tempests, if the foundations are washed out it will fall or be washed away by the flood.

The foolish man is a risk taker and builds for gain on the fertile flood planes of worldly success. The wise man, on the other hand, seeks the certain security of higher ground where he builds on the rock of integrity and truth. He seeks a situation on the lee, protected from the buffeting of the winds of strife. The foolish man represents those who fail to heed the lessons for living encapsulated in the Sermon on the Mount, while the wise man symbolizes those who take note of the lessons and put them into practice.

In life, none is free from the storms and tempests that challenge the integrity of our being. Calamity comes unexpectedly and, for those who aren't prepared, disastrously. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus provides us with instructions for a rock solid life. Let the words of Edward Mote's hymn be our clear and confident catchcry.

'On Christ the solid Rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand.'

It's Not All Smooth Sailing

"*The terrible storm raged for many days, blotting out the sun and the stars, until at last all hope was gone.*"
Acts 27:20

In Acts twenty-seven, Paul tells of his harrowing experience at sea on his way to Rome for trial before Caesar. They encountered strong headwinds. The wind was against them and the sailors struggled with great difficulty to reach a safe port in the worsening weather. The stormy winter season was approaching, yet the ship's officers ignored Paul's warning of danger ahead and set sail again with a plan to reach a safer harbour. Before they could reach their destination, they were caught in a furious storm that ended disastrously in shipwreck. But, because the Captain in charge of escorting Paul and other prisoners to Rome finally listened to him and his assurances of God's protection, all were able to make it to shore without loss of life.

Life is not all smooth sailing. Sudden squalls of social disquiet can blow us off course. Furious storms of contention and contrary opinion may buffet us. Our sails of self-confidence may have been torn to shreds by constant criticism. We may feel totally abandoned by those who we had looked to for support. But, in what may appear to be a hopeless situation, when we are tossed too and fro by waves of deep despair, we can be assured that God is there with us "For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you."" (Hebrews 13:5) The psalmist writes reassuringly for all of us who cry out from the clutches life's fearful storms for the help that only God can provide.

""LORD, help!" they cried in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He calmed the storm to a whisper and stilled the waves. What a blessing was that stillness as he brought them safely into harbor!" (Psalm 107:28-30)

Lord, We Perish

"*And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish.*" Matthew 8:25 KJV

There comes a time when we realize our powerlessness over life's circumstances and our own responses to the inner and outer forces that toss us about on the troubled sea we call life. In this realization we acknowledge that it is not within our own capacity to cope with the situation alone. We are incapable of getting our lives back in order. We need help. This was the experience of the disciples when they struck a storm as they crossed the sea of Galilee. Although some of them were seasoned boatmen, they had no answer for the storm. It was in their extremity that they sought help from the Saviour.

The prophet, Jonah, found himself in a treacherous situation of his own making. He had rebelled against the specific instructions of God to go to Nineveh and had taken a ship in the opposite direction. Not long after setting sail, a severe storm buffeted the ship and there was danger of it breaking up. On learning that Jonah was fleeing from God, the crew realized that his presence jeopardized the safety of all on board. When their efforts to reach land failed, they unwillingly followed Jonah's instructions and cast him overboard. God was, in this experience, saving both Jonah and the ship's crew. For the crew, the storm subsided and they came to belief in the creator God. Jonah was provided with three days of reflection in the fish before being returned to land and the fulfillment of his commission. (see Jonah 1,2)

Could it be that we have a rebellious spirit that we need to cast overboard? Or do our doubts or uncertainties about our situation bring us to the realization that without God's grace, we perish? Jesus told Nicodemus that "God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

Stay With The Ship

> "*Then the sailors tried to abandon the ship; they lowered the lifeboat as though they were going to put out anchors from the front of the ship. But Paul said to the commanding officer and the soldiers, "You will all die unless the sailors stay aboard."* " Acts 27:30-31

We return to the stormy experience of Paul. There were two hundred and seventy six persons on the ship. The crew had lightened the vessel by throwing whatever they could overboard. The cloud cover had made it impossible to take any bearings. The situation was grave. There was little chance to eat. The ship was driven every which way in the Adriatic sea. One night during the fourteen day ordeal, Paul was visited by an angel who assured him that all on board would be saved but the ship would run aground.

On the fourteenth night, the crew sensed they were nearing land. A series of soundings indicated they were coming into shallower waters. They put out four anchors and waited for dawn. The crew tried to abandon ship but Paul, sensing their plan, told the centurion that all needed to stay on the ship.

These sailors wanted to give up, but they were found out and stopped. We may feel, like those sailors, that we want to abandon the ship, but the message comes clear, "stay with the ship."

In our struggles through the storms of life we may have neglected our need for spiritual nourishment and, in our weakened state, wanted to give up. But the Lord calls to us and says, "Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid and do not panic . . . [I] will neither fail you nor abandon you." (see Deuteronomy 31:6)

> "Therefore, since God in his mercy has given us this new way, we never give up." (2 Corinthians 4:1)

We Have An Anchor

"*This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. It leads us through the curtain into God's inner sanctuary.*" Hebrews 6:19

Ships carry different anchors for different situations. Today's text speaks of an anchor that is trustworthy, reliable and secure. An anchor that holds us safe even through the toughest trials. Hope is that anchor. It holds us secure and safe.

Hope springs eternal, ***Hope*** is a dream...
that looks into the future and grasps at things unseen.

Hope sees a bless'd event descending from above;
It's a looking for... a waiting, a longing based on love.

Hope is faith in action that works toward a goal.
With patience and endurance it purifies the soul.

Hope takes up the challenge; It's in there-and to win.
It builds again the bridges washed out by floods of sin.

Hope is a flowing fountain of endless faith and love.
A helmet now in battle, a crown in Heav'n above.

Hope is a mighty anchor secured within the veil;
unmoved by all events in time that may our souls assail.

With ***Hope***, no disappointment in sorrow, grief, or pain.
There's a promised resurrection and life to live again.

For ***Hope*** gives us the boldness, by faith, to enter in
and claim the gifts of glory..
Through ***Christ***, our ***Hope***, we ***Win***.

(cf. Rom.8:24-25;Col.1:27;1Thess.5:8;Tit.1:1;2:13;3:7;Heb.6:18-19)

"You faithfully answer our prayers with awesome deeds, O God our savior. You are the hope of everyone on earth, even those who sail on distant seas." (Psalm 65:5)

Trust The Captain

"*And, behold, God himself is with us for our captain . . .*" 2 Chronicles 13:12 KJV

"*For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.*" Hebrews 2:10 KJV

From these two statements we can learn and ponder three important truths, truths that we do well to acknowledge, accept and act upon so as to experience the calmer waters of the safe haven of God's loving presence.

Truth 1: God has and is authority because He is the author of all things animate and inanimate. He spoke all into existence for His glorious purpose. We are because He is, He knows and He can.

Truth 2: God has a plan to achieve His purpose. His intent is to bring all those who are willing to accept His salvation plan for their lives into a share in His glory. "And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering." (Romans 8:17)

Truth 3: God has and is the means because of who He is. God is love. It is because of who He is that He manifested Himself to man in the garb of man. "Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death." (Hebrews 2:14)

Our Captain knows the ropes. He was tested even unto death but conquered even that enemy, weathered even that disastrous storm and came through it as Captain of our soul.

There is a Safe Haven

> "*"LORD, help!" they cried in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He calmed the storm to a whisper and stilled the waves. What a blessing was that stillness as he brought them safely into harbor!* " Psalm 107:28-30

The context of these verses draws a picture taken from the experience of those who traverse the open seas for trade and commerce. There are dangers on the open sea but the possibility of obtaining economic advantage as an outcome of trade counterbalances the risk.

But such a life is seldom smooth sailing. So it is that, in our journey through life, we may encounter contrary winds of false teachings that blow us off course, treacherous tides of opinion that may strand us on sandbars of uncertainty and discouragement, or buffeting billows of temptation and conflict that test our strength, stability and resilience. In such circumstances we long for a safe haven, a shelter in the time of storm.

When a storm is brewing, sailors like to steer their ships into the safety of a well protected harbour within which they can take sanctuary. The Psalmist says, " you are God, my only safe haven. . . you are my safe refuge, . . . Send out your light and your truth; let them guide me. . . Let me live forever in your sanctuary, safe beneath the shelter of your wings!" (compiled from Psalms 41:2-3; 61:3-4) Let us fix our course on the lighthouse of God's truth. Let it guide us safely into the sanctuary of His presence.

"The Lord's our Rock, in Him we hide, . . .
Secure whatever ill betide, . . .
The raging storms may round us beat, . . .
We'll never leave our safe retreat, . . .
A shelter in the time of storm." (Vernon Charlesworth)

— Week Five —

Coming Home

"Every day of our lives we should surrender ourselves to God. Thus we may gain special help and daily victories. The cross is to be borne daily. Every word should be guarded, for we are responsible to God to represent in our lives as far as possible the character of Christ." (E.G. White, Child Guidance, p.483)

Step 3

Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

A Longing For Home

> "*For this world is not our permanent home; we are looking forward to a home yet to come.*"
>
> Hebrews 13:14

Just as the child that is lost cries, "I want to go home", or the student newly enrolled in a boarding academy experiences the reality of homesickness, or the young soldier deployed to a conflict zone looks forward to messages from home and longs with anticipation for his re-deployment back home, so we too long for that 'coming home' experience, a deep desire for the comfortable unpretentiousness, love and acceptance that makes home.

Irrespective of what our past 'home' experience has been, there is an innate desire for what home stands for - a place of belonging where there is safety within certain and secure boundaries, acceptance based on our beingness rather than our conformity, and a place where unconditional love can be expressed and experienced without fear or favour. Home is more than just family, it is community where compassion and care are dominant features of the environment, where there is reciprocal respect, egalitarian equality and we all contribute willingly to the common good.

We are on a journey home. We are "looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland . . . to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed by God." (Hebrews 11:16,10) Jesus has assured us a place in that heavenly home. His words are clear, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. . . When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am." (John 14:1-3) Let's keep longing.

> "But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness." (2 Peter 3:13)

It's Where I Belong

> "*Then I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside. I was so foolish and ignorant—I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you. Yet I still belong to you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny.*"
>
> Psalm 73:21-24

Asaph, the author of Psalm 73, was the leader of the two-hundred and eighty-eight musicians appointed by King David to serve in the tabernacle. One would think that Asaph had it made. Yet, in this Psalm, he reveals the struggles that he faced. Born to the tribe of Levi, he had no allotment of land from which he could gain economic advantage. Rather, he, with all the other Levites, was economically dependent on the contributions of the other tribes of Israel for sustenance.

He tells us how he struggled with envy. He envied the "fat cats [who had] everything their heart could wish for!" (V.7) In contrast, he was locked into a dependant economic underclass. He cries out, "I get nothing but trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain." (V.14) He tried to understand the inequity that seemed to exist in society. But it was not until he entered the sanctuary that he came to understand what it was all about. It was then that he realized that envy and bitterness were destroying him.

Do we, as had Asaph, allow senseless reasonings and foolish thoughts fulminate into bitter resentment of what life offers us? Let's take a fresh look at the situation as did Asaph. Irrespective of our circumstances, we belong to God. He offers to take our hand and lead us out of the mire of our own making into the glorious destiny that is His plan for us.

> "But as for me, how good it is to be near God! I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do."
>
> Psalm 73:28

The Way Home

"*They will ask the way to [Zion] and will start back home again. They will bind themselves to the LORD with an eternal covenant that will never be forgotten.*"
Jeremiah 50:5

Our text for today is set in the context of a prophecy about the fall of the Babylonian Empire and the promised return of the Jewish captors from Babylon to their homeland. In Biblical parlance, Babylon is symbolic of all that is evil. John, in the book of Revelation (ch.18:1-7), records the warning message of a mighty angel who depicts this symbolic city as being under demonic influences and where greed and self gratification rules. The angel is on a rescue mission and calls to God's people, those who choose to "bind themselves to the Lord " in a covenantal relationship, to flee this 'city', a 'city' marked for destruction.

There is but one safe way back home, that is through the one who is 'the way'. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) We are invited to come to Him to find rest from the burdens of our own 'Babylon' experience. He asks us to be yoked to Him, to be taught by Him and learn His humility and gentleness, and experience His offer of rest (see Matthew 11:28-29).

In our text, the use of the capitalized 'LORD' indicates that those who join 'the way' are binding themselves in commitment to the example and teachings of the great 'I AM', the Son of God and the Son of Man who says, "If you love me, obey my commandments." (John 14:15)

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. " (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

Glimpses of Home

> "*How lovely is the place where you live, O LORD WHO RULES OVER ALL! I desperately want to be in the courts of the LORD's temple. My heart and my entire being shout for joy to the living God.*"
>
> Psalm 84:1-2 NET

"Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them." God said to Moses (Exodus 25:8). The tabernacle was not to be built after mans own devising, but was to follow, in every detail, the pattern revealed to Moses on the mount. The tabernacle built by Moses was based on a clear pattern of what is a heavenly reality. It presents to us a graphic illustration of 'the way' to the throne and dwelling place of God.

Let's take a quick tour through the sanctuary to get a snapshot of what it represents to us individually.

Enter through the gate - Jesus says, " I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved." (John 10:9)

Into the courtyard of grace - "Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins" to "purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God." (Hebrews 9:14) "For the Lamb . . . will lead [us] to springs of life-giving water." (Revelation 7:17)

The livingroom of life in Christ - Jesus is the bread of life and the light of the world and imparts that life and light to us. Through Jesus, our prayers are as incense before God. (see John 6:35;9:5; Matthew 5:14; Psalm 141:2)

The Parlor of the Father's presence - "By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's house, let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him." (Hebrews 10:10:20-22)

Back Home

> "*They will accept responsibility for their past shame and unfaithfulness after they come home to live in peace in their own land . . .* " Ezekiel 39:26

Let's be honest. Let us accept, with a repentant heart, responsibility for the poor choices we have made and the consequences of those choices to both self and others. This is an important step in the healing process. We cannot change the past. We cannot deny that we have stumbled, or should we say careered headlong off the path planned for our lives. The Lord says, "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts, . . . my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."(Jeremiah 29:11; Isaiah 55:8-9)

The call of our gracious LORD comes to us with an offer that we resist to our loss. He says, "Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink - even if you have no money! Come, . . . it's all free!" Then He adds, "Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David." (Isaiah 55:1,3)

Then, let us accept the uncondemning grace of Christ that opens up to us entrance into the perfecting power and presence of our loving Father. Let us come back home to our father's house where He has a room waiting for each of us. A place of peace, a place where we belong.

> "Seek the LORD while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near. Let the wicked change their ways and banish the very thought of doing wrong. Let them turn to the LORD that he may have mercy on them. Yes, turn to our God, for he will forgive generously." (Isaiah 55:6-7)

Home Restored

> "*But if you pray to God and seek the favor of the Almighty, and if you are pure and live with integrity, he will surely rise up and restore your happy home.*"
> Job 8:6

These are the words of Bildad the Shuhite, one of the three friends who came to mourn and comfort Job after his world had collapsed around him. While some of the assumptions drawn by these three friends show the shortcomings of human understanding and reason, yet there are truisms within what they say. This appears to be one of them.

In king David's prayer of contrition after his adulterous episode with Bathsheba, he pleads repeatedly, "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51:2 NIV; cf. Vs.7,9-10) He seeks a renovating experience as he cries with penitence, "Oh, give me back my joy again . . . Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you. . . . Forgive me . . . then I will joyfully sing of your forgiveness." (Vs.8,12,14) There is no joy when one is burdened by guilt and shame but in receiving and accepting God's forgiveness there is real joy.

God is in the restoration business. He takes our broken lives and patiently restores them and makes them a habitation for His spirit. He will take this broken world, cleanse and decontaminate it, then return it to a state of pristine perfection to be re-inhabited by purified people. They will dwell in the glorious New Jerusalem, an immense city bathed in the glorious light of the Divine Presence, a home free from sorrow and sadness. (cf. Revelation 21 & 22)

> "Those who have been ransomed by the LORD will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness." (Isaiah 35:10)

At Home in Our Heart

> "*Then Christ will make his home in [our] hearts as [we] trust in him. [Our] roots will grow down into God's love and keep [us] strong. And may [we] have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.*"
> Ephesians 3:17-18 (rendered in the 1st person)

Jesus says, "Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into his home and share a meal with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20) The Lord desires a meaningful meal with us, not a casual, take it or leave it fast food snack. And He who is the master chef of the universe offers to us himself. He says, " "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35) Then David says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good."(Psalm 34:8).

For some of us, life's experience has left a bitter taste. What we thought was sweet turned to sourness. We hesitate to respond to the invitation to taste the goodness of the Lord but when we do, we find that His recipe for life is "sweeter than honey, even honey dripping from the comb." (Psalm 19:10) This is no artificial sweetener. This is natural goodness from the nectar of heaven.

The immeasurable, all encompassing dimensions of God's love are beyond our comprehension. He who was one with the Father, stepped from the realms of glory into a dysfunctional world so as to plant seeds of His divine love in our hearts. He wants the presence of His love to grow in us as we learn to trust Him, to delight in His presence and send down roots of faith into the depths of His love.

> "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, LORD God Almighty." (Jeremiah 15:16)

— Week Six —

Letting Go and Letting God

"So long as we surrender the will to God, and trust in His strength and wisdom, we shall be guided in safe paths, to fulfill our appointed part in His great plan. But the one who depends upon his own wisdom and power is separating himself from God."

(E.G. White, Desire of Ages, p.209)

Step 3

Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Saved From the Shackles

> "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.*" Romans 8:1-2 RSV

From time to time pictures of handcuffed and shackled men appear in the media. They may be condemned as criminals or detained as terrorists. They are restrained because they are thought to be a danger to society. The practice of restraining a person has also been applied to those whose mental state has made them a risk to their own self as well as to others. Such a picture greeted Jesus and His disciples one morning when they alighted from their boat onto the shores of Gadarene country.

They were confronted by a crazed man who had broken the chains that had previously bound him and was a threat to not only himself but to others. His was not now the bondage of metal chains but the bondage of demonic possession. Jesus commanded the demons to leave him. Immediately the shackles that had bound his mind were removed and he regained his sanity. (see Mark 5:1-20)

All too often we succumb to the shackles of hurtful habits, past and present pain, and the consequences of our decisions or behaviour that condemn us to live lives in bondage to guilt and shame. Jesus says, ""I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin." But then he says, "if the Son sets you free, you are truly free." (John 8:34,36) It is in allowing Christ to teach us that we find freedom. As we accede to "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" as our text for today says, we are set free from the bonds of sin.

> "Jesus said to the people who believed in him, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:31-32

The Law of Liberty - 1

Liberated to Love God

> "*But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.*"
> James 1:25 RSV

Jesus was asked the question, "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" Jesus replied by giving two foundational relational commands, the first and the greatest of which states, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." (see Matthew 22:35-38) Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5, the first of some eleven admonitions to whole heartedly love God found in that book. Such love is demonstrated by a willingness to live within the Law of God.

King David explains that there is real freedom in a life lived in harmony with the commandments of our creator God. He says, "I will walk in freedom, for I have devoted myself to your commandments." (Psalm 119:45)

When Jesus made the statement "If you love me, you will obey my commandments" (John 14:15), He was actually quoting from the second of the ten commandments where He states, "I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands." (Exodus 20:6) The first four commands of the decalogue address our relationship with our creator God. It is because He is our creator, indeed our blessed redeemer, that He owns the right to the singleness of our devotion, a devotion not to be shared with any other created thing. As our creator and sustainer, He has given us an active reminder in time that marks His every right to our love, allegiance and devotion. He who is Lord of the Sabbath came to comfort and liberate us so that we can freely love and live for Him.

> "For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:17)

The Law of Liberty - 2

Liberated to Love Each Other

> "*For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Galatians 5:13-14

This command, "Love your neighbor as yourself", is second only to the command to love God wholeheartedly. It is a succinct summary that encapsulates the essence of the last six commands of the decalogue.

One day a lawyer had a conversation with Jesus in which he quoted this well-known command, but he had one question for Christ. He asked, "who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29)

The answer should have been clear to him. He had quoted freely from Leviticus 19 where this divine principle is clearly stated and where it includes strangers as well as those of the immediate community (Vs.18,34). Jesus responded with the parable of the good Samaritan. After telling the story, Jesus asked the lawyer to determine who, of the three persons who had opportunity to help the injured man, showed true neighborliness. His answer was clear, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:36-37)

Love for others is expressed in the way we honour and respect the person and property of those we interact with, and how we serve them. Indeed, the practice of a disciplined Christian will include acts of kindness towards those in need. (see James 1:27). Jesus says, "Love each other in the same way I have loved you." (John 15:12) And His love lead Him to sacrifice all so that we could have life in Him.

> "Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other." (Romans 12:10)

Truly Free

"*So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free.*"

John 8:36

He who is 'the truth' said, "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32)The one who made us will not forget us and He says, "I have swept away your sins like a cloud. I have scattered your offenses like the morning mist. Oh, return to me, for I have paid the price to set you free." (Isaiah 44:22) Christ, the light of the world, came not to condemn but to save - to set us free from the dark dungeon of despair. Light reveals truth and truth enlightens those who seek it (see John 3:16-21).

Paul put's it this way, "We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin." (Romans 6:6-7) In his extended explanation of this truth he adds, "Sin is no longer your master, . . . you live under the freedom of God's grace." (V.14) God's grace does not give us freedom to sin but freedom from sin. We are free to choose - but in choosing we become, in a sense, slaves to our choice. Paul says, "But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life." (V.22)

"Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy." (V.19) Here we see that there are two step by step pathways, the way of deepening slavery to sin and death, and the way to righteousness, holiness and eternal life. Ultimately, to be truly free is our choice.

"For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil."

1 Peter 2:16

From Prisoner to Princely

> "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*" 1 Peter 2:9 NIV

It was after the last supper, after Judas had left the upper room, that Jesus spent some time preparing the remaining eleven disciples for the coming storm. During that discourse He said, "I no longer call you slaves, . . . Now you are my friends." And then He adds, "You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit . . . You are no longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world . . ." (John 15:15-16) These statements are made within the framework of a call to an abiding and all encompassing love experience (see Vs. 9-17).

A few hours after hearing that he was chosen, Peter, the author of today's text, had thrice denied His Lord. The realization of this left him severely shaken. But the words "I chose you" held him in hope until, some days later, his position and calling were reaffirmed.

Paul takes up the 'chosen' theme in his letter to the Colossians. He reminds them that "Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others." (Col.3:12-13) He highlights the magnanimous nature of those who are heirs of the King of Kings. As members of the heavenly Royal Family, we have been chosen to emulate the life that Christ modelled for us while on this earth. And to all the qualities that Paul has listed above he adds the quality that makes home, home.

> "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. " (Colossians 3:14)

Liberty In Christ

"*Christ has liberated us to be free. Stand firm then and don't submit again to a yoke of slavery.*"
Galatians 5:1 HCSB

Jesus was in His home town, Nazareth. On the Sabbath He went to the synagogue where He read a passage that clearly pointed to His purpose and mission. He read, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the **poor**[1]. He has sent me to proclaim that **captives**[2] will be released, that the **blind**[3] will see, that the **oppressed**[4] will be set free, and that the time of the LORD's favor has come." (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61:1-2). Let us see how Christ saves us from every circumstance.

1. **Delivers from indebtedness** - "Don't love money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you."" (Hebrews 13:5)
2. **Frees from the fetters of habits, hangups and addiction** - "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him." (Hebrews 7:25)
3. **Enlightens the ignorant and indifferent** - He says, "I came into this world for judgment, in order that those who do not see will see . . ." (John 9:39 HCSB)
4. **Transforms those confined by cultural conformity and peer pressure** - "For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors" (1 Peter 1:18)

When we put our trust in Christ, when we let go and let God direct our ways, He will enter and make His home in our hearts. (see Ephesians 3:17) His presence liberates, enlightens and enables us to live free in Him.

"I will walk in freedom, for I have devoted myself to your commandments." (Psalm 119:45)

The Miracle Make Over

> "*What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation. May God's peace and mercy be upon all who live by this principle; they are the new people of God.*" Galatians 6:15-16

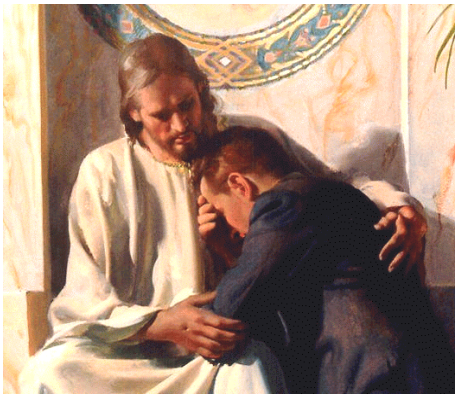
House renovations, personal make-overs and tantalizing culinary creations are the bread and butter of popular reality TV shows. We like to restore, refurbish and renew that which has lost its original luster. And what pride the car enthusiast takes in reclaiming a rusty old wreck and through hours of tireless labor, brings it back to its original showroom state. But with even greater passion, Christ seeks to work a miracle make-over in our lives.

Paul gives us this advice, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." (Romans 12:2) The key directive in this statement is 'let God'. Let God, the master artist, restore his image in us.

As we have already noted in an earlier devotional, David sought the reality of such an experience. He pleaded for a total make-over with these words. "Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me. . . . Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you." (Psalm 51:10,12) Let's not just putty over the canker of our souls or be content with a patch up job using second-hand or non-genuine parts. What we need is restoration based on genuine replacement parts. We need the replacement of our calloused hardened hearts with a responsive and willing heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26) We need the humble mind of Christ (Phil 2:5) to work a mental make-over for us. For genuine restoration, we are required to consent and willingly submit to the Master of Make-over, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus.

— Week Seven —

Finding Forgiveness



"Christ is the source of every right impulse. He is the only one that can implant in the heart enmity against sin. Every desire for truth and purity, every conviction of our own sinfulness, is an evidence that His Spirit is moving upon our hearts."

(E.G. White, Steps to Christ, p.26)

Step 4

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves.

Longing for Forgiveness

> "*O Lord, hear. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, listen and act! For your own sake, do not delay, O my God, for your people and your city bear your name.*" Daniel 9:19

Daniel was nearing the end of his life when he prayed the prayer that closes with the words of the text for today. His prayer is offered on behalf of his people who had endured exile from their homeland for nearly seventy years. Jeremiah had prophesied that they would return after seventy years and Daniel longed for the restoration of his people and their city, Jerusalem. And so he prayed a beautiful prayer of confession, "But we have sinned and done wrong . . ." (V.5), and ends his prayer with a plea for forgiveness. Daniel had experienced powerful evidence of God's leading in his life, but now, longed for the evidence of God's forgiveness of his people. He clung to the assurances of God, given through Jeremiah, "I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins." (Jer.31:34)

King David also expressed a longing for forgiveness when he prayed the prayer of repentance recorded in Psalm 51. He said, "my sin is ever before me." (V.3 KJV) Nagging guilt can only be assuaged by the assurance of forgiveness.

We have all experienced that haunting presence of guilt and shame, the uncomfortable awareness that we have done wrong. This was the experience of Adam and Eve when they ate of the forbidden fruit. Adam replied to God's question, "Where are you?", with, "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked." (Genesis 3:9-10) Unresolved guilt leaves us insecure, uncomfortable and unsure - certainly a state of unrest that settles into a nagging numbness from which we long for release.

> "Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins." (Psalms 51:1)

Seeking Forgiveness

"*"My lord the king, please forgive me," he pleaded. "Forget the terrible thing your servant did when you left Jerusalem. May the king put it out of his mind.*"
2 Samuel 19:19

King David was growing old. His son, Absalom conspired to take the throne from his father. To avoid conflict in the city, David and his household fled from Jerusalem toward Jericho. As they passed through Bahurim, Shimei, a relative of Saul the previous king, threw a barrage of curses and stones at David to which David refused to retaliate.

Later, after the conspiracy, had been put down and David was about to return to Jerusalem, Shimei came and fell before the king and sought forgiveness for his rash actions (see key text). He said, "I know how much I sinned." (V.20) He knew that, but for the mercy of the king, he should die.

It is only as we acknowledge the folly of our ways that forgiveness can benefit us. James declares, "So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. . . Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. . . Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor." (James 4:7,9-10)

In later years, Shimei failed to abide by the conditions of safety placed on him by David's son, Solomon. In so doing, he forfeited the kings mercy. Shimei asked forgiveness only to save his own skin rather than having genuine sorrow for sin. In the act of seeking forgiveness there needs be total surrender, complete capitulation.

All to Jesus I surrender; All to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him,
In His presence daily live.
All to Jesus I surrender; Humbly at His feet I bow,
Worldly pleasures all forsaken;
Take me, Jesus, take me now.

The Gift of Forgiveness

> "*For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ."* Romans 5:15

At times it seems that in this world we swim in a sea of slip-ups, failures and wrongs perpetrated by ourselves and others. We are buffeted by waves of pain, blame and shame. We may carry burdens of grief and guilt over acts intended or unintended that have marred our relationships with others and even self. In such situations the question is, "Am I as equally ready to give the gift of forgiveness as I am ready to receive it?"

Toward the end of the Second World War, Corrie ten Boom was incarcerated in the German concentration camp at Ravensbruck for helping Jews flee from the holocaust. She survived the ordeal and after the war was over she became an evangelist talking about God's love and forgiveness. After speaking to a congregation in Munich, she was approached by a man who she recognized as a former SS guard at Ravensbruck. He thanked her for her message of forgiveness and wanted to shake her hand. The pain of the past welled up in Corrie's mind - how could she forgive? She prayed that the Lord would forgive her angry thoughts and give her grace to forgive this man. She reached out her hand and in taking his she felt a wave of love and acceptance for him, a gift of forgiveness that she received and shared.

Forgiveness is complete in the relinquishing of resentment and the restoration of relationship; the burying of blame and the building of bridges; in casting off conflict and care, and clinging to Christ our redeemer and King.

> "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God."
> (Ephesians 2:8)

Conditions for Forgiveness

> "*But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.*" 1 John 1:9

Forgiveness involves a preparatory process on the part of the one seeking forgiveness as well as the one who is to give forgiveness. God's willingness to forgive is immense. But there is one thing He will not, indeed cannot forgive. When a person boldly, arrogantly and foolishly ignores Him and thinks, "I am safe, even though I am following the desires of my own stubborn heart." (Deuteronomy 29:19) Such an attitude blocks the path to forgiveness. "The LORD will never pardon such people." (V.20)

Another roadblock to forgiveness is found in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:15) Later Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive a brother. In answering this question Jesus told the parable of the Unforgiving Servant at the end of which He reiterates the need for a heartfelt willingness to forgive.

Another step to obtaining forgiveness is to acknowledge our wrong, to **confess**. David says, "When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long." (Psalm 32:3) Denial is damaging. Confession is the first step toward restoration but it lacks substance without repentance. Repentance is genuine sorrow for and a turning away from our wrong thoughts and acts. It is a turning from our own willful way back to a the way and will of the Lord.

Where our wrongs have caused harm or loss to another there is a need, where possible, to make restitution. Remember Zacchaeus. He promised Jesus, "if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!" (Luke 19:8)

> "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight!" (Psalm 32:1)

Accepting Forgiveness

> "*Son of man, give the people of Israel this message: You are saying, 'Our sins are heavy upon us; we are wasting away! How can we survive?' As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live. Turn! Turn from your wickedness, O people of Israel! Why should you die?* "
>
> Ezekiel 33:10-11

How many of us have experienced the despair of repeated failure? Some of us may have entertained the thought that, because of our seeming inability to resist the repeated onslaught of temptation, God could never forgive us, that we are doomed. Note that such was the situation of the people of Israel in Ezekiel's time. They were virtually saying, "I'm so bad, there's no hope for me". But let us also note that the Lord is really waiting for us to repent - to turn and accept the fact that God is ready and willing to forgive and restore. He says, "Why should you die?"

Peter reminds us that "The Lord . . . does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent." (2 Peter 3:9) The question isn't whether God is willing to forgive us but, rather, are we willing to accept His offer of forgiveness. To accept His offer of forgiveness implies a readiness to accept His rescue plan. Like David, we should cry, "Rescue me from the mud; don't let me sink any deeper!" (Psalm 69:14) Remember the more we wallow in the mud of our own making, the mud of despair and self-loathing, the deeper the mire becomes. When we reach out and grasp the rescue rope of God's grace there is certainty that He is ready and will save. Paul experienced this and writes,

> "This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all."
>
> 1 Timothy 1:15

Full Forgiveness

> "*Yes, this anguish was good for me, for you have rescued me from death and forgiven all my sins.*"
>
> Isaiah 38:17

King Hezekiah was gravely ill with a boil which had probably progressed to septicemia (blood poisoning) because the Bible record states that he was near death. Isaiah the prophet came to him with a message, "This is what the LORD says: 'Set your affairs in order, for you are going to die. You will not recover from this illness.'" (Isaiah 38:1)

Hezekiah prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. Isaiah was still in the palace precincts when the Lord directed him to return to the king and deliver a message of hope and healing, " I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will add fifteen years to your life." (V.5)

When he had fully recovered he wrote a song of praise that expressed his gratitude to God. Today's text is part of this song. The NIV translation renders it this way, "Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back."

The Lord pleads with us to turn to Him and receive of His forgiveness. He says, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." (Isaiah 43:25 NIV) The message of full forgiveness is repeated by the prophet Micah who writes, "Once again you will have compassion on us. You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean!" (Micah 7:19) What a promise! What a great and gracious and fully forgiving God we have!

> "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy." (Micah 7:18 KJV)

On Being Forgiven

> "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*"
>
> Ephesians 4:32

"Just as" - these two words qualify the directive expressed by the verb "Be" in our text for today. Paul mentions three qualities of being that he calls Christ's followers to emulate - kindness, compassion and forgiveness. These three qualities were expressed so vividly in the life of Christ and experienced by Paul. Let us learn from Christ's example.

The kindness of Christ - It was seen in the way He responded to children, his willingness to heal, and in His feeding of the multitudes on more than one occasion. His immeasurable kindness was most fully expressed "in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8 NKJV) That is the measure of His kindness.

The compassion of Christ - Matthew tells us that "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."(Matt.9:36) Jesus came to " seek and save those who are lost." (Luke 19:10) Jesus says to us, "You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate." (Luke 6:36)

The forgiveness of Christ - No better example of His capacity to forgive is than His words on the cross when He cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) "He [God] is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins." (Ephesians 1:7)

Just as Jesus - that is the model we are called to emulate. Let us express His kindness, compassion and forgiveness.

> "The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master." (Luke 6:40)

— Week Eight —

Let's Be Honest

"Confess your sins to God, who only can forgive them, and your faults to one another. If you have given offense to your friend or neighbor, you are to acknowledge your wrong, and it is his duty freely to forgive you. Then you are to seek the forgiveness of God, because the brother you have wounded is the property of God, and in injuring him you sinned against his Creator and Redeemer"

(E.G. White, The Faith I Live By, p.128)

Step 5

Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

The Principle of Honesty

> "*But you desire honesty from the womb, teaching me wisdom even there.*" Psalm 51:6

Honesty is an elemental relational principle that is essential to the integrity of our lives from the earliest moments of awareness till the candle of life is snuffed out. Solomon declares the destructive and detestable nature of dishonesty in contrast to the value of honesty. He says, "Honesty guides good people; dishonesty destroys treacherous people." (Proverbs 11:3; cf. Vs.1,5)

Honesty stands as an essential, indeed primary principle in all twelve step programs. "Getting honest and learning to live openly with ourselves, God, and others is such a big part of recovery." (Narcotics Anonymous Way of Life) It's a healing balm to the soul that restores the integrity of our beings.

The idiom, 'Honesty is the best policy' was clearly on the mind of the founders of 'The Honest Co.' in California. The first principle of their company is to "Create a culture of honesty". They say, "We are serious about honesty – both as it applies to the integrity of our relationships and in being true to you." What a difference it would make if we all could apply this principle to our everyday life.

To love honestly is to live with integrity. Honesty is the abiding partner of love and it is by integrating these two principles that we have true integrity of being. Love needs honesty to survive and the converse, honesty needs love, is also true.

The essence of honesty is truthfulness. Christ came to model the principles of grace and truth - love and honesty.

> "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14 NIV)

How Honest

> "*An honest witness tells the truth; a false witness tells lies*." Proverbs 12:17

Just two verses after stating our text for today, Solomon says, "Truthful words stand the test of time."(V.19) Then, two chapters later, he adds, " A truthful witness saves lives." (14:25) How precious is honesty. Truthfulness is to be treasured.

In courts of law, witnesses are required to give sworn testimony by oath or affirmation. When Jesus was brought before Caiaphas, the night of His betrayal, he, at first, said nothing in response to the questions thrust at Him. Finally the high priest said, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" (Matthew 26:63 NKJV) Knowing well the consequences of His answer, He answered in the affirmative. For months they had tried to trap Jesus into giving them grounds to arrest Him. They even admitted (though facetiously) "we know how honest you are. You teach the way of God truthfully." (Matthew 22:16)

Christ was the embodiment of truth and honesty. So, when "Pilate said, "So you are a king?" Jesus responded, "You say I am a king. Actually, I was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true."" (John 18:37) Honesty and truthfulness were hardly the domain of this ambitious governor who could say, ""I find nothing wrong with this man!", and then, in deference to the crowd, crucify Jesus.

Those who abide in Christ and within whom Christ abides will reflect His honesty in their words and life.

> "Use honest scales and honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt." (Leviticus 19:36 NIV)

Honest to God

> "*And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest*."
>
> Luke 8:15

There are three attributes clearly in evidence in an honest, good-hearted (or should we say God-hearted), triple A rated response to God's word. They are acceptance, adherence and actualization. The expression of these attributes results in an honest to God life experience.

Acceptance - There is more to acceptance than acknowledgment. There is a humble receiving and implanting of God's incorruptible, life-giving word in the heart (see James 1:21). Acceptance is hearing that activates a positive response mechanism within us and forms the foundation for the next 'A'.

Adherence - Our text says that honest people not only hear but 'cling to' God's word. This is not a 'sticky notes' adherence that can easily be dislodged. This is a 'super-glue' commitment that fastens us firmly to the will of God so that we become one with Him. With such a bond we are able to come to the third 'A'

Actualization - This is the productive harvest phase that results from patient perseverance, application and action. It results in the development of the 'divine nature', and the replication of the mind of Christ within us. (see Philippians 2:5)

Being honest to God is an expression of true filiality with the Father. Jesus invites us into such a relationship - a relationship which He modeled so meticulously while on this earth. Oneness with God is to be honest to God.

> "I take joy in doing your will, my God, for your instructions are written on my heart." (Psalm 40:8)

Honest to Others

> "*You yourselves are our witnesses—and so is God—that we were devout and honest and faultless toward all of you believers.*" 1 Thessalonians 2:10

How honest are we in our day to day dealings with each other. The story is told of a couple who drove up to a fast-food outlet close to closing time. The man went in, made his order and waited. After a few minutes he was called, handed a box, left the store and drove off. When they opened the box they found that the store manager had inadvertently given them the wrong box - a box containing his days takings. They returned to the store, returned the box and were about to leave when the manager suggested he call the newspaper so they could do a story on their honesty. The man declined because the woman with him was not his wife.

This story illustrates the fact that, all too often, our honesty is patchy. Honesty is an expected societal norm that is tested in every aspect of life - in the workplace, on the sport field, in the classroom, in commercial transactions and in the family and community. In every interaction and action our honesty is tested. How 'honest and faultless' can we claim to be? Yet honesty is a highly admired quality. It is the very foundation of trust and integrity.

Solomon wrote, "Better to be poor and honest than to be dishonest and rich."(Proverbs 28:6) This proverb is highly appreciated but less frequently practiced.

> "The greatest want of the world is the want of men - men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their inmost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall." (E.G. White, Education, p.57)

Honest with Ourselves

> "*Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.*"
> Romans 12:3 LP

In the context leading up to this statement, Paul pleads with believers to gift their lives to God as living sacrifices in an ongoing act of worship. He warns about worldliness and then says, "but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." (V.2) Then, just before he says 'be honest . . ', he warns, "Don't think you are better than you really are." (V.3 MP)

When we drive a new car we take time to evaluate the layout of the instruments, switches, functions and features. Our body and mind has to adjust to the position of pedals, steering wheel, brakes and gears. And where is the ignition? It takes time for us to develop a synergistic relationship with a new vehicle.

Learning to live the new life in Christ is much the same. It requires an honest and ongoing evaluation of our progress in developing the fulness of Christ-like character. As our awareness of Christ's character becomes clearer, so our reflection of it becomes more visible. By beholding we become changed. (See 2Corinthians 3:18)

The Type 1 diabetic soon learns the importance of faithful self-monitoring and accurate self medication. Survival is dependent on maintaining the discipline. Our spiritual survival is dependant on the maintenance of a spiritual self evaluation process. With the Lord's instruction and help we will press on toward godly maturity in Christ.

> "This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13)

Let's Be Specific - 1

(To Whom)

"*Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.*" Romans 12:17 KJV

Sam Houston, whose colorful career saw Texas become part of the United States and whose name graces Texas's most populace city is quoted as saying, "I would give no thought of what the world might say of me, if I could only transmit to posterity the reputation of an honest man." More than any of the great accomplishments he achieved, the reputation of honesty was most desired. A reputation of honesty, once tarnished, is very hard to regain. Because it is an evidence based reputation, it takes time and effort to repair.

Honesty underpins integrity. It is an expression of truth encapsulated in a state of being. We are honest when we uphold and live truth. This is what our key text is saying. Honesty lived in our relationships with others, expressed in the genuineness of our communications is the simple, factual expression of the "let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'" principle enunciated by Jesus in His sermon on the mount. (Matthew 5:37; cf. James 5:12)

An honest life is a life without pretense. Honesty exists where our thoughts, intents and motives function in harmony with reality. Paul writes of his endeavors to live this way in these words, "We reject all shameful deeds and underhanded methods. We don't try to trick anyone or distort the word of God. We tell the truth before God, and all who are honest know this." (2 Corinthians 4:2) There is openness in honesty. There is no distorting, twisting, bending or denial of the truth. It does not exaggerate, magnify, or diminish the fact or take a myopic view. It must be genuine to be honest.

"An honest answer is like a kiss of friendship"
(Proverbs 24:26)

Let's Be Specific - 2

(How Specific)

> "*Use only honest weights and scales and honest measures, both dry and liquid.*" Ezekiel 45:10

Honesty touches every sphere of life and, in particular, the sphere of commerce and industry. National and international laws have been enacted to prevent or minimize fraudulent, misleading, unfair and deceptive commercial practices so as to promote fair trade and protect the consumers of products and services

Some of us can probably recount multiple experiences when we feel we have been 'ripped off' in some way or another. We soon learn to be more wary, less trusting and can even become paranoid about the intent of those we are dealing with. But could it be that we are, in our own way, doing the same thing? Are we completely honest in our workplace, in our home? Do we do a fair days work? Do we meet others expectations? Is the golden rule our guide?

Isaiah points out that only those who are honest will have entrance to the heavenly realm. He says, "Those who are honest and fair, who refuse to profit by fraud, who stay far away from bribes, who refuse to listen to those who plot murder, who shut their eyes to all enticement to do wrong—these are the ones who will dwell on high." (Isaiah 33:15-16fp)

Let's be specific about honesty. It is essential for the healing of our hurts, hang-ups, habits, and addictiveness. Honesty is a moral imperative in all aspects of life - in our dealings with others and certainly with ourselves. It is the building block of trust and foundational to a life of love.

> "The remnant of Israel will do no wrong; they will never tell lies or deceive one another. They will eat and sleep in safety, and no one will make them afraid." (Zephaniah 3:13)

— Week Nine —

Surrender

"In surrendering ourselves to God to be molded and trained by Him, we reap great advantages; for we have weaknesses of character, and we unite ourselves to One who is able to remove these defects." (E.G. White, The Bible Echo, January 29, 1894)

Steps 6 & 7

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Why Are We Still Fighting?

> "*O God, have mercy on me, . . . I am constantly hounded by those who slander me, and many are boldly attacking me*." Psalm 56:1-2

In December, 1944, Hiroo Onodo, a young Japanese Army Intelligence Officer, was dispatched to Lubang Island with orders to gather intelligence and conduct gorilla warfare behind enemy lines. Eight months later the Japanese Army surrendered but Onodo didn't know and didn't surrender. Years passed and his group of four dwindled until he was alone, still surviving in the jungles fighting a battle that had long ended. It was in 1974, almost thirty wasted years later, that a Japanese college student, Nario Susuki, found him and he eventually laid down his arms.

The battle for man's allegiance has been raging for millennia. As a consequence of the fall of Adam and Eve in Eden, we were automatically enlisted as slaves to sin at our conception. David confessed, "For I was born a sinner - yes, from the moment my mother conceived me." (Psalm 51:5) Like Hiroo Onodo, we carried on a battle of resistance for no good purpose. Now that we have realized the futility of the ways of the flesh we want out from the secret jungles of our own misguided surmising. But there are barricades of doubt, chains of circumstances and we are, all too often, held captive by hurts, habits and mental misconceptions.

Paul, in Romans, asks, "Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?" (5:35) "No," he says, "despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us." (5:37) Let us throw off the shackles of the past and claim victory in Christ.

> "But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ."
> (1 Corinthians 15:57)

Waving The White Flag

"*And if he can't, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace while the enemy is still far away*."

Luke 14:32

In the context of our text for today, Jesus is illustrating the point that anyone who seeks to be His follower needs to count the cost of commitment. He uses two illustrations to bring home His point. Firstly he points out the obvious foolishness of attempting to build a house "without first calculating the cost" (V.28). Then He pictures the approach of a more superior power. A power that logic tells you, you cannot defeat. The numbers are stacked against you. To fight is foolishness. Total capitulation is called for. Remember, the one who seeks our surrender is not our enemy but, rather, we are 'the enemy' whom God seeks to reconcile to himself. Paul puts it this way, "For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Romans 5:10 NIV)

While the pastor of a South American church was making a passionate call to his congregation to yield their lives to the Lord, one by one members of the congregation took white handkerchiefs from their pockets and started waving them in the air in an expression of full surrender. Waving the white flag indicates our acceptance of the conditions of surrender, to receive the gift of God's love and grace as fully expressed in the life of His son - the one who surrendered himself to the cross so that we could be reconciled with our creator. Why not take a white handkerchief or tissue right now and wave it in the air in total surrender to the love of God.

"Lord, take my life, and make it wholly Thine;
Fill my poor heart with Thy great love divine;
Take all my will, my passion, self, and pride;
I now surrender, Lord, in me abide."

(Edwin Orr)

Losing To Win

> "*Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.*" Philippians 3:8 ESV

In the preceding verses to today's text, Paul gives a short outline of his background. Born into a proud Israelite family of the tribe of Benjamin, Paul was a zealous 'Hebrew of Hebrews', a blameless Pharisee and a party to the persecution of the early church. He had trained at the feet of the wise and respected professor of law, Gamaliel, and had gained a reputation as a vehement persecutor of the early followers of Christ. (see V. 5-6 ESV; cf. Acts 22)

But then he says, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ." (V.7 ESV) Paul had an encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus that set him on a dramatic, life changing course that would see the persecutor gladly accept persecution, pain and rejection for Jesus. Whether the wise advice of his former teacher had been weighing on his conscience we cannot be certain. Gamaliel had warned that if the preaching of the Apostles was of God, then to resist it would be tantamount to "fighting against God" (Acts 5:39). When Paul realized that he was fighting against God, he immediately surrendered and said, "What should I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10).

Paul relinquished his power and prestige to win the 'surpassing worth' of oneness with Christ. That's what losing to win means. It's a capitulation that promises victory. As Paul says, "No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us." (Romans 8:37)

> "Then he said to the crowd, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

All, Yes All

> "*So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own*." Luke 14:33

What does Jesus mean? What would He want with our things, our possessions - things that define who we are, our status, our personality, our heritage, intellect and achievements? These are the things that give us identity and a sense of being who we are, our 'ownness', our individuality, our self.

Jesus also said, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37 ESV) Jesus is seeking total commitment from those who would follow Him. And there is a reason for this claim, this expectancy.

Paul tells us clearly that "God paid a high price for [us]" to free us from slavery to the ways of the world. "He has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him." It is through the precious blood of Jesus that we have been redeemed by God to give us " a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for [us], pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay." (see 1 Cor.6:20; 7:23; Eph.1:14; 1 Peter 1:3,4)

He who loves us and gave His life, His all for us asks but one thing of those who would follow Him - our all. This is what it means to surrender. Even as Jesus gave up the glories of heaven to become one with man for eternity, so He asks us to give up all our attachments to this world and give our full commitment to Him for all time and eternity.

> "All to Jesus I surrender, Humbly at His feet I bow, Worldly pleasures all forsaken; Take me, Jesus, take me now. I surrender all, I surrender all. All to Thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all."
>
> Judson W. Van De Venter

No Pain, No Gain!

> "*And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?*" Matthew 16:26

'No pain, no gain', the catchcry of athletes, bodybuilders, and sports people has been around for a long time. There are claims that Benjamin Franklin coined it back in the eighteenth century but earlier forms of the idiom exist. Rabbi Ben Hei, in an early second century Jewish book of oral traditions, is quoted as saying, "According to the pain is the gain." (The Ethics of the Fathers 5:21)

No athlete has received a gold medal without having put effort into the achievement. But what benefit is that achievement if they are found, like the American cyclist, Lance Armstrong, to have breached the rules of the sport by using banned substances. As Paul says, "athletes cannot win the prize unless they follow the rules." (2 Timothy 2:5)

"Don't you realize", Paul says, "that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win!" Then he adds, "I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should."(1 Corinthians 9:24,27) There is a right and a wrong way to achieve the goal of life. Despite the apparent success one may appear to receive in the eyes pf the world, true success comes from honest commitment, effort and dedication.

We are all winners when our surrender is expressed in a willingness to follow the instructions of our heavenly trainer, when we lay aside our own selfish pleasures and desires and take up our cross on a daily basis and follow the instructions and example of Jesus (see Luke 9:23).

> "So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing." (1 Corinthians 9:26)

Hope In Humility

"*So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor*."
1 Peter 5:6

God makes some profoundly pithy statements through Isaiah that challenge us to examine how we relate to Him. He says, "What sorrow awaits those who argue with their Creator. Does a clay pot argue with its maker? . . . How terrible it would be if a newborn baby said to its father, 'Why was I born?' or if it said to its mother, 'Why did you make me this way?'" (Isaiah 45:9-10) Our creator asks, "Do you question what I do . . .? Do you give me orders . . .?" (V.11)

God knows what He is doing. It is He who prompted the wise man to pen these words, "If you listen to constructive criticism, you will be at home among the wise. . . if you listen to correction, you grow in understanding. Fear of the LORD teaches wisdom; humility precedes honor." (Proverbs 15:31-33)

One day Booker T. Washington, the renowned black educator and President of Tuskegee Institute, was stopped by a white woman while walking through an exclusive section of town. Not knowing who he was, she offered to pay him a few dollars if he would chop some wood for her. He obliged, chopped the wood, carried it into her house and stacked it by the fireplace and left. Later, on finding out who he was, she went to his office and apologized."It's perfectly all right, Madam," he replied. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend." His humility won her admiration and resulted in her organizing a donation of thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute. Oh, that we could learn such humility.

"And all of you, serve each other in humility, for "God opposes the proud but favors the humble.""
(1 Peter 5:5)

Giving God The Go Ahead

> "*Suddenly, a man with leprosy approached him and knelt before him. "Lord," the man said, "if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean*."
>
> Matthew 8:2

This leper had real faith, real respect and real humility. In kneeling before Christ he demonstrated his willingness to submit to the will of the Master. His was a request that not only recognized that Christ had the power to heal but that He also had the power of choice and the right to exercise it. Wherever there is a choice there are at least two possible consequences and each consequence may trigger off a range of positive or negative reactions.

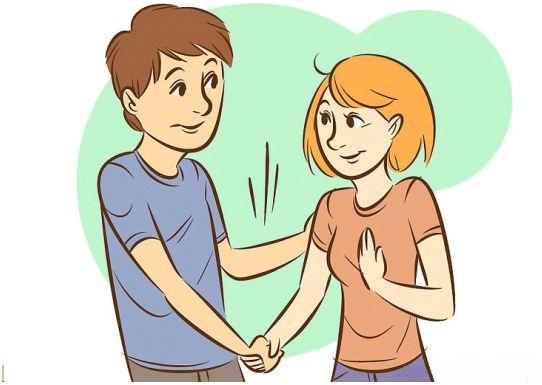
Jesus response was expressed in two meaningful and profoundly expressive ways. He reached out a hand that spoke acceptance more than any words could express and augmented His action with the words of confirmation, "I am willing. Be healed?" Then He added, "Don't tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you." (Vs.3-4) In saying, "Don't tell anyone", Jesus was seeking to minimize the negative consequences to His mission positive act of compassion.

In giving God permission to make changes in our lives, we must be willing to accept His will for us. Peter tells us that "The Lord is not . . . willing that any should perish" (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV). He is just waiting for us to come to Him in repentance and total surrender. In doing this we give Him authority to do what He is best equipt to do - to heal our damaged and broken (leprous) lives of selfishness and sin.

> "Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land."
>
> 2 Chronicles 7:14

— Week Ten —

Making Amends



"It is not . . . too late for wrongs to be righted. Show your repentance for past wrongs by redeeming the time. Where you have wronged anyone, make restitution as it comes to your mind.

(E.G. White, 3 Testimonies, 550-551)

Steps 8 & 9

Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Who Have I Really Hurt?

> "*I have thought deeply about all that goes on here under the sun, where people have the power to hurt each other.*" Ecclesiastes 8:9

Inherent to our capacity to choose (a prerequisite for the capacity to love) comes the power to hurt. When we really think about it, we can only agree with the truth of Solomon's statement in today's text. This capacity to hurt is always multi-dimensional in that, when it is expressed, it affects not only the primary focus of the hurtful thought or act but also the perpetrator and, significantly, the one who gave us the power of choice. And how about the collateral damage!

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the prodigal had some deep thinking about the consequences of his naive ambition and selfish indulgence. He was really hurting and he came to admit that his actions had also hurt not only his family but also his creator. (see Luke 15:18)

We hurt God - When the prodigal son met his father he said, "I have sinned against heaven . . ." Any hurtful act, any act of rejection, any denial pains the One who had created all things and declared them very good only to see them marred by our poor choices. (see Isaiah 53)

We hurt others - Not only the intended or fortuitous target but those who may be caught in a spreading domino affect. Even when there is no intent to hurt others, our actions can have consequences that ripple out in unforeseen ways to course hurt.

We hurt ourselves first - Like a suicide bomber, the perpetrator is the first to be destroyed. Think of the damage we do ourselves just by our own negative thoughts, resentments, and misconceptions.

> Most of all, they hurt themselves, to their own shame." (Jeremiah 7:19)

On Being Entirely Ready.

> "*They replied, "We will give back everything and demand nothing more from the people. We will do as you say*." Nehemiah 5:12

In step six of the twelve steps to recovery it talks about being entirely ready for God to remove our defects - a readiness to permit or allow God access. But in step eight it talks about another readiness - a readiness to make wrongs write, to restore, replace or rectify. Step six deals with surrender, the letting go and letting God. Step eight is about rebuilding bridges, healing hurts making amends.

Many of the exiled Jews who returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity came with little resources and had become so indebted to the more affluent and powerful amongst them that they were brought to a position of slavery. Nehemiah, who had come with authority from king Artaxerxes to complete the restoration of Jerusalem, remonstrated with the nobles and rulers pointing out that their actions were no better than the actions of those who had taken the Jews into exile and slavery to Babylon more than one and a half centuries earlier. They agreed to restore everything.

Any willingness to make amends must come from a genuine awareness of and regret for the hurt, harm or loss we have inflicted on others, ourselves and God. It will be tempered with a desire to in no way cause further harm or hurt.

There is an idiom that says, "Ready, willing and able". We may be fully prepared, that is ready and willing, but not have the capacity, resources or opportunity to make amends. It may be that we need to rectify wrongs, but we know not how. At such times we need to pray the Serenity Prayer.

> "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Righting Wrongs

> "*Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"* " Luke 19:8

Righting recognized wrongs is an imperative of the Gospel and a requirement clearly catalogued in the books of Moses in the laws of restitution. The story of Zacchaeus and his encounter with Christ is a story that enunciates this principle in a way that leaves no doubt as to its essential place in godly living.

Zacchaeus was dishonest to the core. Why? He was a tax collector and a notorious one at that. In Jesus day, tax collectors were considered on a par with harlots and sinners. The scribes and pharisees despised and shunned them. But Jesus chose to mingle with them, to eat with them, to teach them and to love and save them. Zacchaeus soon realized that he was an open book before the Lord. There was no hiding from the one who was seeking to save him. He new what he must do. It was the right thing to do (Luke 19:2-10).

Restitution doesn't come easy, but restitution is obligatory. The Hebrews were required to restore from 100% to 500% of a property pilfered, purloined or improperly obtained (see Exodus 22; Leviticus 6:2-5). But how do we make restitution to a person whose reputation we have sullied, whose character we have defamed without doing further damage? We need to remember that "An offended friend is harder to win back than a fortified city. Arguments separate friends like a gate locked with bars. . . The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences." (Proverbs 18:19,21)

> "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:16)

When Right is Wrong

> "*What sorrow for those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark, that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter*." Isaiah 5:20

Making amends is certainly the right thing to do. But there are times when the 'right thing' can be the wrong thing. The ninth step of twelve step recovery programs contains an exception. It says, "Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others." It is right to make amends but where the act of making amends causes harm to the person or someone else, it is wrong.

Consider the motive - Ask the 'Why' question. If, in attempting to deal with our own burden of guilt and shame, we harbour any vengeful or retaliatory intent toward the person harmed, we are approaching the issue with the wrong motive. Making amends is about meeting the aggrieved person's needs or loss, not our own.

Consider the Consequences - Ask the 'What' question. In making amends, there may be personal loss. But this should not deter us from making amends to those we have hurt provided that, in the act of making amends, we don't add fuel to the fire, salt to the wound or in some way engulf others in the pain.

Consider the Approach - Ask the 'How' question. We need God's help and understanding so that our making amends is free from any residual animosity or any attempt to manipulate the aggrieved into forgiving us or to impose any sense of blame. Let us respect the right of the aggrieved to reject our desire to make amends. There are some things we cannot change - we need to accept that.

> "So if you . . . suddenly remember that someone has something against you . . . go and be reconciled to that person." (Matthew 5:23-24)

No Pain Again

"*If you repay good with evil, evil will never leave your house.*" Proverbs 17:13

"*He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever*." Revelation 21:4

Here are two texts that paint opposite pictures. One reminds us of the consequences of a pattern of destructive thinking and behavior, while the other speaks of liberation from the hurts of life into a restored and renewed environment where there will be no pain again.

There are two songs that reflect on this theme of 'No Pain Again' from the polar opposites of these two texts. One bewails the pain that comes with insincerity, the other rejoices in the assurance that God will make all things new where evil is banished forever. One says,

"Here comes the pain again.
Here comes that pain you bring to me.
Here comes that same old pain again."
Karyn White

The other says,

"No more night, no more pain,
No more tears, never crying again.
And praises to the great, "I AM".
We will live in the light of the risen Lamb"
Walter S Harrah

We need to reflect on the level of our sincerity and commitment to making meaningful amends. How much better it is for us to cast aside the pain of the past, to let go the hurts and step into the pain free zone of grace.

"But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." (2 Cor.12:9)

Don’t Rub It In!

> “*He will be wounded and disgraced. His shame will never be erased*.” Proverbs 6:33

Shame has a habit of hanging around. It’s like a wound that won’t heal, a stubborn indolent ulcer of the soul that resists every effort to restore integrity. It erodes relationships and personal integrity, and partners with abuse.

Abusive relationships are such that both the perpetrator and the victim will likely indulge in shame-based thinking. Shame-based thinking relentlessly eats away at any sense of self-worth and drives the soul into a state of utter despair so that even a compliment is considered in a negative light.

Shame fosters worthlessness, lack of commitment, loneliness, feelings of failure, debilitating guilt, self-imposed isolation and super-sensitivity of spirit. But Christ came to eradicate shame.

A woman caught in adultery was brought before Jesus. Her shame was palpable, her humiliation complete. She had no defense and she new, all too well, that death was her expected fate. Her accusers asked Jesus for an opinion. He began writing in the dust on the ground. When pressed for a response, He said, “let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” and again began writing in the dust. Slowly the accusers dispersed leaving the woman alone before Jesus. Then He said, “"Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."” (see John 8:7,10-11) Christ did not rub the accusation or the shame in; rather, he rubbed it out. Jesus came not to condemn - not to rub it in, but to save - to rub our shame out. Let Him do it today.

> “Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. “ (Ephesians 4:32)

Realizing Restoration

> "*Now **repent** of your sins and **turn to God**, so that your sins may be **wiped away**. Then **times of refreshment** will come from the presence of the Lord, . . . until the time for the **final restoration** of all things . . .*" Acts 3:19-21 (emphasis supplied)

These words were spoken by Peter as he gave credit for the healing of a lame beggar to Jesus. News of the healing had traveled rapidly within the Temple precinct and Peter took the opportunity to call the people to recognize the error of their ways and repent. These words of Peter present a process that brings restoration. Let's reexamine the process.

Repent - The first step is to acknowledge the nature of our wrongs and recognize that, as a consequence, our lives had become unmanageable.

Turn to God - We surrender our will to the will of God. We acknowledge His divine capacity to renew, restore and recreate in us a reflection of His divine nature.

Wiped Away - We accept the justifying, cleansing power of His matchless grace that sweeps away our sin and expunges the record with the blood of Jesus.

Times of Refreshment from the Lord - There is a progressive process of restoration and renewal wrought by the Holy Spirit, a step by step surrender to the sanctifying power of our Savior's presence.

Final Restoration - There will come that moment in time when our corruptible, mortal beings will be changed into the likeness of His glorious body at His coming, "Behold", He says, " I make all things new." (Revelation 21:5)

> "And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

— Week Eleven —

Walking the Walk

"The wisdom which God gives will lead men to self-examination. The truth will convict them of their errors and existing wrongs. The heart must be open to see, realize, and acknowledge these wrongs, and then, through the help of Jesus, each must earnestly engage in the work of overcoming them."

(E.G. White, 4 Testimonies, 361)

Steps 10

Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

“This is the Way . . .”

> “*Your own ears will hear him. Right behind you a voice will say, "This is the way you should go," whether to the right or to the left.*” Isaiah 30:21

GPS systems in cars are becoming the norm. It is replacing the street directory and maps as the way to navigate to or through an unknown destination or area. When a GPS unit is set to a particular destination it gives you voice instructions, directions and warnings. But they are only as good as the information in them as some drivers have found to their embarrassment. Take, for example, the Swiss driver whose van got jammed on a narrow mountain walking track and rescuers had to use a heavy lift helicopter to get the van out. Or the tourists who ended up stuck in the bay-side mud flats when trying to drive to a popular island tourist destination only accessible by ferry.

GPS systems can get it wrong, but so can we. This is very true of our spiritual walk. If the clear directives given us by God in His Word are misinterpreted, wrongly applied or misconstrued we may find ourselves on a path to nowhere. It isn’t, as Peter puts it, ”a matter of one's own interpretation”. (2 Peter 1:20) It is in getting the message right and then following the instructions carefully. Earlier in the chapter from which our text for today comes, Isaiah records, “This is what the Sovereign LORD . . . says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.” (V.15)

Jesus has set us an example of fidelity to the Father. He says, “I don't speak on my own authority. . . I say whatever the Father tells me to say.” (John 12:49-50) Then, in confidence He says, “And I know his commands lead to eternal life.” Let us listen carefully as He leads.

> “Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.” (Proverbs 3:6)

The Narrow Path

> "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*" Matthew 7:14 NIV

These verses represent the real challenge of life. A challenge that confronts every human being. A challenge that was present in the garden of Eden and is ever present with us today. It deals with our power of choice.

The essential message of this snippet from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is that we will find real life when we choose the safe path that has protective limits and restrictions. This is a key message that is found elsewhere in Jesus sermon. Take, for example, the way He extends the meaning of the sixth and seventh commandments to include even our thoughts and feelings of anger and lust (see Matt.5:21-30).

In the preceding context He says, "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets." (V.12) Then, in the verses that follow our key text, He points out the inadequacy of just a profession of faith - what is required is the practice of faith, a faith that bears good fruit, that listens and obeys. It's not enough to say, "Lord! Lord!" or prophecy, or cast out demons or work miracles says Jesus, if we fail to obey. He says, "Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter" through the gateway to life and into the kingdom of heaven. (see Vs. 15-23).

> "Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster. For I command you this day to love the LORD your God and to keep his commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live . . ."
> (Deut 30:15-16)

Follow the Leader

"*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*" John 10:27

The shepherd motif is strongly represented in scripture. Jacob is the first to articulate the concept of the Divine Shepherd as he blessed Joseph and his two sons just before his death. He said, "May the God before whom my grandfather Abraham and my father, Isaac, walked - **the God who has been my shepherd all my life**, to this very day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all harm - . . ."

David, the shepherd of sheep who was chosen by God to be the shepherd of Israel wrote what must be the most popular of all Psalms - the shepherd's psalm. It begins with the words, "The LORD is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1)

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the nurturing nature of the Lord with these words, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young." (Isaiah 40:11) It is reassuring that as we traverse life's experience, the good shepherd is there to lead us, guide, protect us and, at times, pick us up and carry us through to safer pastures.

Micah prophesied that the Messiah shepherd would be born in Bethlehem (see Matthew 2:1-6; Micah 5:2). Jesus came as a Saviour shepherd to search for his lost sheep, sheep who will listen to His voice and follow Him (see John 10:14-16, 27). He is the Great Shepherd who, with His own blood, sealed the eternal covenant of grace that assures those who turn from their wanderings to follow Him, that they will be recipients of "a crown of never-ending glory and honor." (Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4) Great and Good Shepherd, we humbly, willingly, gladly and obediently follow.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

One Step at a Time

> "*So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing.*" 1 Corinthians 9:26

We learnt in our previous reading that the Great and Good Shepherd is one who gently leads. He does not drive but gently leads every step along the narrow way. And because He has embraced us with such love and acceptance, we follow Him devotedly, submissively and intentionally one step at a time.

In the lyrics to the popular gospel song, "One day at a time", is a line that says, "Show me the stairway that I have to climb". That stairway may be long and steep, and the going may seem tough but, as the song says, "Lord Help me today, Show me the way One day at a time." Could we, just for this moment, change the lyrics to, "Lord Help me each day Show me the way, One step at a time". One step taken with purpose and intent. Not thoughtlessly or mindlessly, Not haphazardly or blindly, but with a clear purpose, with a full commitment - this is one step upwards as the Good Shepherd leads.

Another word that stands out in our text for today is the word, "every". This means that there is a constant and consistent commitment to take each step as it comes. This week we are focusing on what Step 10 is all about. It says, "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." The word 'continue' means that there is no stopping, we press on one step at a time so that every step is a step of Hope (faith) toward Healing (sanctification). Let us, like Daniel (Dan.1:8), purpose in our hearts to press on and upward with our Saviour Shepherd one step at a time along the narrow way to really living.

> "For we have become companions of the Messiah if we hold firmly until the end the reality that we had at the start." (Hebrews3:14 HCSB)

Keeping in Step

"*Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?*" Amos 3:3 NIV

In 1897 Albert B. Simpson, a Presbyterian preacher, evangelist and author wrote a hymn entitled 'Step By Step.' Take time to reflect on the message of the following verses taken from that hymn.

'Tis so sweet to walk with Jesus,
Step by step and day by day;
Stepping in His very footprints,
Walking with Him all the way.

'Tis so safe to walk with Jesus,
Leaning hard upon His arm,
Following closely where He leads us,
None can hurt and naught can harm.

Step by step I'll walk with Jesus,
Just a moment at a time,
Heights I have not wings to soar to,
Step by step my feet can climb.

Jesus, keep me closer—closer,
Step by step, and day by day;
Stepping in Your very footprints,
Walking with You all the way.

There's something about keeping in step. It demonstrates unity of purpose, effort and action. It is an intentional oneness, a harmonious complement, a closeness that brings comfort, contentment and complete wholeness. It is a bond of love and loyalty that lifts life to a higher plain of living. It is a state of being that, when tested, stays true.

"Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world." (James 4:8)

Watch Those Stumbling Stones

> "*Our lives are in his hands, and he keeps our feet from stumbling.*" Psalm 66:9

Let's look at some of the stumbling stones that can trip us up and disrupt our walk with our Saviour.

Doubts - A lack of certainty breads distrust and where distrust festers there is a breakdown of relationship - a loss of unity, a breach of relationship that can lead to a parting of the ways.

Unrealistic or false expectations - Peter and the disciples had them and they were a stumbling-stone to Jesus as he attempted to prepare them for His approaching passion (Matthew 16:21-23). We can likewise block the Lord's leading by our misconceptions.

Criticism and condemnation - Paul says, "So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall." (Romans 14:13)

The good life - Quoting from David, Paul writes, "Let their bountiful table become a snare, a trap that makes them think all is well. Let their blessings cause them to stumble . . ." (Romans 11:9) The good life leads to comfortable complacency. Lukewarmness, Christ calls it (see Revelation 3:14-21). Ezekiel describes it as "the stumblingblock of their iniquity." (7:19)

Liberty turned to license - The idea that God's goodness and grace is a safety net for continued sin is clearly fallacious. God's grace isn't a license to sin. "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?", Paul asks and then answers, "Certainly not!" (Romans 6:1-2 NKJV).

> "We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, and no one will find fault with our ministry." (2 Corinthians 6:3)

Don’t Look Back

> “*Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”* ” Luke 9:26 NIV

We know the importance of keeping our eyes on the road ahead when driving. Many road accidents occur because the driver has been distracted. Even driving on autopilot is dangerous - our eyes are fixed ahead but our mind is somewhere else.

Jesus was talking to His disciples about His second coming and explained that the decadence of society in that day would match that of the antediluvians and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Then he said, “Remember Lot’s wife!” (Luke 17:32 NIV) Lot, his wife and two daughters were led out of Sodom and were instructed not to look back. But, the Biblical account states, “But Lot’s wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.” (Genesis 19:26 NIV)

An early convert to Christianity in Assam was called to renounce his faith or die by the village chief. His response is immortalized in the words of a familiar hymn attributed to the Indian missionary, Sadhu Sundar Singh. This Assamese martyr died with these words of faith flowing from his lips, “I have decided to follow Jesus . . . Though no one joins me, still I will follow . . . The cross before me, the world behind me . . . No turning back, no turning back.” That is commitment.

Jesus calls us to selfless commitment. A forward looking commitment with our focus fixed on following Jesus, on being in step with Jesus. No turning back, no looking back, no regrets whatever; no regrets where ever the path may lead - walking the walk with Jesus.

> “Then he said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

— Week Twelve —

Growing in Grace

"The only safety for the human agent who is striving for an immortal crown is to live in hourly contact, in conscious, loving communion with the highest principles God has set forth in His word. Truth and righteousness must be inscribed upon every action done for our fellow men. Mercy must constantly flow forth from the soul, revealing an abiding Christ. Sanctified judgment and purified reasoning will give strength and solidity and spiritual power. Then every cause that asks for our sympathy and co-operation will receive careful consideration."

(Ellen G. White, Bible Training School - The Word of God)

Steps 11

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

The Mind of Christ

"*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus*, . . " Philippians 2:5 NKJV

Paul made this statement. But, in another place, he quotes Isaiah who asked the rhetorical question, "who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?" Paul answers, "But we have the mind of Christ." (Isaiah 40:13 in 1 Corinthians 2:16 NKJV) To have the mind of Christ is to share His plans, purposes and perspectives.

Christ's Plan - ""For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."" (Jeremiah 29:11) Jesus came on a planned mission. Peter tells us that God had a prearranged plan to give us hope through the death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:23-24). This plan had been established before the world began (1 Cor 2:7) Christ is engaged in a planned rescue, restoration and renewal mission - and we are a part of it.

Christ's Purpose - Speaking of Himself, Jesus said, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." (Luke 19:10) He has made His purpose very clear, "For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." (Matthew 8:13) Yes, we are included in His saving purpose.

Christ's Perspective - Christ lived a life of humble service in complete obedience to and dependence on the will of the Father. He reached out in compassion to all humanity and shared our sorrows, bore our grief and suffered our shame (Philippians 2:5-8; Luke 5:6). Yes, He seeks to embrace us in His boundless love. He came to this earth to be one with us and longs for us to be one with Him.

"Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. . .." (Romans 12:2)

Christlike Words

> "*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.*" Psalms 19:14 NKJV

Words are expressions of who we are. The truism 'We are what eat' is also true of what we take into our mind. We are constantly receiving and processing information through our senses that impact who we are for good or ill. For us to express Christlike words we need to have consumed a diet rich in the words of Christ. The Psalmist was absolutely right when he sang, "How sweet your words taste to me; they are sweeter than honey." (Psalms 119:103) Another messenger wrote, "As your words came to me I drank them in, and they filled my heart with joy and happiness because I belong to you." (Jeremiah 15:16 NET)

Isaiah tells us, "The Sovereign LORD has given me his words of wisdom, so that I know how to comfort the weary. Morning by morning he wakens me and opens my understanding to his will." (Isaiah 50:4) Spending time with the Word of God first thing in the morning is like manna from heaven. When our hearts are filled full with the Word of God, His words will flow freely from us. We become a conduit of Christlike communication. Paul admonishes to "Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them." (Ephesians 4:29)

Meaningful and compelling words are words that are expressed in actions. Our lives speak to others in ways that no word can express. Beautiful expressions of God's abiding love, peace and salvation.

> "The most persuasive eloquence is the word that is spoken in love and sympathy. . . Shall we not try to lighten the hearts of those around us by words of Christlike sympathy?" (Our High Calling, p.295)

Genuine Christlikeness

> "*Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world*." 1 Peter 2:12

Peter raises an important point in this text. He is talking about living the authentic Christian life - the genuine product. When we go shopping for quality goods we like to get genuine branded products crafted by recognized and reputable manufacturers. Looks can be deceiving. Labels can be falsified.

Take, for example, the claims on the labels of fruit juice in the supermarket. Some are made from freshly squeezed fruits, others are made from reconstituted fruit juice concentrates, still others contain additional natural or artificial flavours or flavour enhancers. Yet the labels can boldly claim to be genuine.

There is much counterfeiting of products out in the market-place. But what of our lives, as Christians? Are we the genuine thing or are we just a counterfeit? How do we stand up to the scrutiny of our neighbors?

There is a well known poem by Myra Brooks Welch called 'The Touch of the Master's Hand". It tells of an apparently worthless old violin being sold at auction that gained real value when played by a master musician. When we let the Master pick us up, dust off the grime of life, tighten and tune our strings then stroke the bow of his grace over our lives so that we make sweet melody to the honor of God, then is revealed our worth in the eyes of the One who made us.

"But the Master comes,
And the foolish crowd can never quite understand,
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought
By the Touch of the Masters' Hand."

Making Christlikeness a Habit

> "*Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.* " Ephesians 4:15

That first word, 'instead', tells us that Paul is pursuing a line of reasoning where he is comparing one mode of thinking with another. He is reinforcing the importance of unity and maturity in those who seek to measure up to the standard of life exemplified by Christ.

In the preceding verse he paints a picture of immature thinking that is susceptible to "every wind of new teaching" and "lies so clever they sound like the truth". It is then that he gives the better alternative, the 'instead' alternative that will lead to growing Christlikeness.

The key phrase in today's verse is, "*we will speak the truth in love*". Love is the governing principle behind every Christlike communication or action. There is no manipulative motive, no sinister supposition, no tricks or deception, only a desire to be, in word and act, a continuing living letter of divine grace and love.

To become "more and more like Christ", we need to spend more time with Him. In the classic book, The Desire of Ages, Ellen White writes, "It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ. We should take it point by point, and let the imagination grasp each scene, especially the closing ones. As we thus dwell upon His great sacrifice for us, our confidence in Him will be more constant, our love will be quickened, and we shall be more deeply imbued with His spirit." (p.83). Should we not make this our daily habit, our necessary spiritual exercise, our daily food for faith?

> "The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:8)

A Reflection of Christ

> "*Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is.*" 1 John 3:2

The small Norwegian town of Rjukan lies within the shadow of the mountains for six months of the year. But now the town square is bathed in sunlight reflected from an array of three large heliostat mirrors high on the hills above the town. These mirrors are mounted and controlled in such a way that they follow the sun and reflect its light into the town.

What a wonderful example of messengers of light these mirrors give us. They take the rays of the sun and reflect them in focused blessing to the townspeople below. Like these mirrors, we can be cleaned, polished and directed so that we reflect the rays of God's love to those around us. Paul explains it this way, "So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

"Jesus Himself, in His infinite mercy, is working on human hearts, effecting spiritual transformations so amazing that angels look on with astonishment and joy. The same unselfish love that characterizes the Master is seen in the character and life of His true followers. Christ expects that men will become partakers of His divine nature while in this world, thus not only reflecting His glory to the praise of God, but illuminating the darkness of the world with the radiance of heaven. Thus will be fulfilled the words of Christ: "Ye are the light of the world."" (E.G. White, Testimonies for the Church, Vol.5, p.731)

> "Oh, that my actions would consistently reflect your decrees!" (Psalms 119:5)

One with Christ

> "*Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him.*" Philippians 3:8-9

At the beginning of this week we attempted to understand something of the mind of Christ and what it means to have such a mind, a mind that has a divine plan, a divine purpose and a divine perspective. In today's text Paul tells us that the one and only thing of real worth is to "gain Christ and become one with him". This is a merging where our beingness is brought into unity with the beingness of Christ.

This is a uniting that may be likened to the merging of two individual sets of genetic information into one whole to create a new creature. So it is, as we discard the things of the flesh, pair up with the very nature of Christ and experience the proofreading power of the Holy Spirit as it corrects the errors of our nature, that we come into the fulness and oneness of a new being in Him.

In this bond of unity we become one in plan, purpose and perspective. Jesus put it this way in His prayer for His disciples, "I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me." (John 17:21-23)

Let the pollination of His presence produce fruit in our lives to His glory and to His honor and to the saving of souls.

> "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony." (Colossians 3:14)

Living Christlikeness

"*For to me, living means living for Christ, . . . But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ.*"

Philippians 1:21-22

The King James Version of the first part of this verse reads, "For to me to live is Christ". Think of it. What a bold statement. Such was the relationship between Paul and the One who pursued him, confronted him and commissioned him to devote his life to reaching the gentiles. He did this not only through his preaching but, more importantly, through his living.

Paul declares, "My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

The prolific hymn writer of the 19th Century, Frances R. Havergal, began one of her hymns with this prayer:-

Live out thy life within me, O Jesus, King of kings!
Be Thou Thyself the answer to all my questionings;
Live out Thy life within me, in all things have Thy way!
I, the transparent medium, Thy glory to display.

Let us ponder these words, particularly the last line, "I, the transparent medium". Transparent means that those who see and interact with us recognize a heaven sent presence in us not of human making. The words of another hymn give expression to this thought:-

Not I, but Christ, be honored, loved, exalted;
Not I, but Christ, be seen, be known, be heard;
Not I, but Christ, in every look and action,
Not I, but Christ, in every thought and word.

Ada A. F. Whiddington

"Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him."

(Colossians 3:10)

— Week Thirteen —

Talking the Talk

"As food to the hungry and water to the thirsty, so is the doing of God's work to those who obey His will because they love Him. Those who are engaged in the work of the ministry are to give evidence that God has a message for them to bear and a work for them to do. They are to labor in the spirit of meekness, showing that they have learned in the school of Christ His lowliness of heart. Those who are ever humble and contrite carry with them the evidence that they have been with Jesus and learned of Him."

(Manuscript Releases Vol.14, p.143)

Steps 12

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others with like problems and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The Word of Life

> "*We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life.*" 1 John 1:1

In this introduction to his first letter to the followers of Christ in Asia, John speaks of a personal relationship with the One to whom he gives the appellation, "the Word of life". This Divine being is the self existent One who spoke this life supporting world into existence, brought forth an abundance of diverse living things and breathed life into the beings to whom he entrusted the management of this finely tuned ecosystem.

This same Word, John tells us in another place, took on the fleshly nature of man so that He could dwell with us and lovingly share with us His boundless grace and truth (see John 1:14). This same Jesus spoke to Nicodemus of the need for spiritual rebirth and undoubting belief if one wants to be part of God's eternal Kingdom; who offered the woman at the well life giving water to quench the thirsting of the soul (John 3,4). This living, loving, life giving Word spoke life into the sick, dying and deceased. Then, without a word, went like a lamb to the cross to bear the guilt and shame of our sins, our grief and our iniquity so that we could be recipients of His abundant life(Isaiah 53).

John joyously declares, "This one **who is life itself** was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is **eternal life**. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 emphasis supplied) We too, can be one with the living Word - He who is the way, the truth, the life.

> "Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."
> (John 16:24)

The Words of My Mouth

> "*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*" Psalms 19:14

David utters this prayer at the end of one of the most beautiful Psalms in all scripture. In it he marvels at the glory of God revealed in the heavens. Then he extols the wondrous virtues of God's enduring words of instruction, wisdom and enlightenment that bring joy to the heart, discernment to the minds eye and protection from presumptuousness.

The Lord has gifted us with the gift of speech and language. He says, " I have put my words in your mouth" (Isaiah 51:16) He who is the Word said, "Let Us make man in Our image" (Genesis 1:26). He gave us the ability to communicate pleasing, factual, loving thoughts, concepts, feelings and information to others through speech, writing and body language.

But sometimes our words are not genuine, not always reflective of our inner thoughts. Jesus points out that the words we speak come from the heart - words that may be untrue, cutting and slanderous (see Matthew 12:34; 15:18-20). These may be politically correct, but are designed to deceive. David includes the meditations of our heart with the words expressed and, in so doing, makes it clear that pleasing communications must needs come from an equally pleasing thought process to be acceptable. Pleasing words that proceed from a heart intent on deception are dishonest and constitute a lie. Solomon calls them "an abomination to the Lord". (Proverbs 12:22 NKJV).

> "The greatest want of the world is the want of men - . . . men who in their inmost souls are true and honest; . . . men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall." (E.G. White, Education, p.57)

Keep it Simple

"*But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.*"
Matthew 5:37 NKJV

The story is told of a young first year college student who wanted to impress his father. His father had been a good long distance runner, so he decided to take up running. Unfortunately, he had no athletic ability. His first race was a two-man race in which he ran against the best long distance runner in the college. He was badly beaten. Not wanting to disappoint his father, the boy wrote home as follows: "You will be happy to know that I ran against the best miler in the school. He came in next to last, while I came in second."

While each point made in the young man's letter to his father was a 'true' statement, together they conveyed a false message, a less than honest appraisal of the facts.

In today's text, Jesus is setting forth a principle of simple but exact honesty. "It condemns the deceptive compliments, the evasions of truth, the exaggerations, the misrepresentations in trade, that are current in society and in the business world." (E.G. White, Education, p.236) James says, " If we could control our tongues, we would be perfect" (James 3:2)

The words that we speak paint pictures. These pictures may be true and accurate or they may be distorted, out of perspective, abstracted, or any number of variations from the truth of the subject. Jesus asks us to watch our words. An often quoted author, Austin O'Malley, made this observation, "Those that think it permissible to tell white lies soon grow colorblind." Today, let Jesus, 'The Word' be the master of our lips, the tamer of our tongue.

"But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned." (James 5:12)

The Message

> "*This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another.*" 1 John 3:11

John the beloved gives us the message for today. A foundational message, a message that Jesus emphasized, indeed lived and exemplified. A message that comes as a binding, obligatory instruction from God Himself. A message that John has experienced, expressed and explained so emphatically in his gospel and epistles. A message so simply put that all can understand - "We should love one another."

Jesus presents a message of friendship, and the binding principle of friendship is love. So that we can understand more fully the message we are asked to accept, practice and share; let us dwell on what Jesus is saying in the following passage.

> "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. . . This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command." (John 15:9-10,12-14)

The message of Jesus' ultimate expression of love is so simple yet so profound. He lay down His life to rescue, redeem and reconcile us into an abiding, loving, respectful and committed relationship with the Father and Himself. This is a message that brings hope and a message that brings healing. A message that brings us out of darkness and despair into the light of God's life giving love.

> "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law."
>
> (Romans 13:8)

A True Witness

> "*A truthful witness saves lives, but a false witness is a traitor.*" Proverbs 14:25

This proverb presents a contrast between two positions. One is based on accurate, evidence based representation of fact. The other is full of falsehood, deception and misstatement. One is genuine the other is fakery.

John presents Jesus as an example of a true witness to the old but ever new principle of life - "to love one another". He writes, "Jesus lived the truth of this commandment, and you also are living it. For the darkness is disappearing, and the true light is already shining." He goes on to say that those who claim to live in the light but harbor hate for another have lost the way, are walking in darkness and can be a stumbling block, a false witness to others (see 1 John 2:7-11).

This same John tells us that "God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all." (1 John 1:5) He also tells us that "God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them." (1 John 4:16) In a prayerful psalm to the Lord, David says, "Remember me in the light of your unfailing love." (Psalm 25:7) From these statements we can see that love is light. To let our light shine is to love as Christ loves. To be a true witness, we must honestly and genuinely love others responsibly with the best of intent and in their best interest.

There is another observation that we are bound to draw. When we snuff out the light of God's love, when we hide it from those around us we are bearing false witness. Rather, let the flame of the Holy Spirit bring the glorious light of God's love into our lives so that we can be true witnesses.

> "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere . . and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

The Unspoken Word

"*Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity.*"
1 Timothy 4:12

The unspoken word comes in the form of a living letter written in a language that all can read. It is a letter from Christ, written by the Spirit of God upon the tables of our hearts (see 2 Corinthians 3:2-3). Our key text for today points to five ways we can convey hope and healing to those around us.

Through our conversation style - The tone of our voice, the expression of our body language, conveys messages that may even contradict the words we utter. The message is clearest when what we say is in harmony with how we say it.

Through our Lifestyle - How we live. The pattern of the life we live is expressed in the way we perform our day to day responsibilities and duties. Peter says, "Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors." (1 Peter 2:12)

Through our Compassion - Peter goes on to say, "Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble." (1 Peter 3:8 NIV)

Through our Faith - That is through the faithful and sincere practice of the teachings of Christ as revealed in His Word.

Through a Life of Purity - "And so, dear friends" Peter says,"make every effort to be found living peaceful lives that are pure and blameless in his sight." (2 Peter 3:14)

"Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness."
(1 Timothy 6:11)

Heart to Heart

> "*Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?*" John 4:29

These words were spoken by the Samaritan woman who encountered Jesus alone by Jacob's well. In that conversation Jesus broke down every wall of resistance and became the answer to every longing this woman ever had. He offered her life in place of existence, acceptance in place ostracism, and a mission to bring hope to others.

Jesus comes to us with a clear message of hope. He speaks to us heart to heart. He declares to us these welcome words, "I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself." (Jeremiah 31:3) Because of this love, God the Father sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to save the world of which we are a part. And even as He came into the world to save the world, He stands ready to come into our hearts and sup with us individually in a one to one tête-à-tête that grows naturally into an ongoing, indeed eternal, relationship.

There is, in this heart to heart relationship, a responsibility to link up with others in like manner, to form 'heart to heart', saving relationships where the love of God is shared and sustained in bonds of fellowship.

The last of the twelve steps to Hope and Healing encourages us to "carry this message to others with like problems and to practice these principles in all our affairs". Sharing the story of our own saving relationship with the Lord brings encouragement and hope to those who are struggling with the hurts, habits and hangups of life. In this there is mutual benefit.

> "Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself. Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own bodies."
>
> (Hebrews 13:3)

Come, Follow Me

"Come, follow me!", is the Saviour's call;
"Take up your cross!" says our all in all.
"This is the way, come walk with me,
Live as I lived and you will see
That life is best lived in service to others,
Treating them all as sisters and brothers.

Come, follow Him, though the way may be rough;
Give of your all, but is it enough?
There's a foe to face, so enter the fray;
Battle the demons with Him ev'ry day.
Let Christ be the victor in your battle with sin;
With Christ as your Captain, you surely will win!

Then, when all is said and done,
When the battles fought and the war is won,
We will hear the call of our Captain true,
"Come, enter the home I've prepared for you!"
That will be such a glorious day,
But till then, let us wait and watch and pray.

L. N. Powrie

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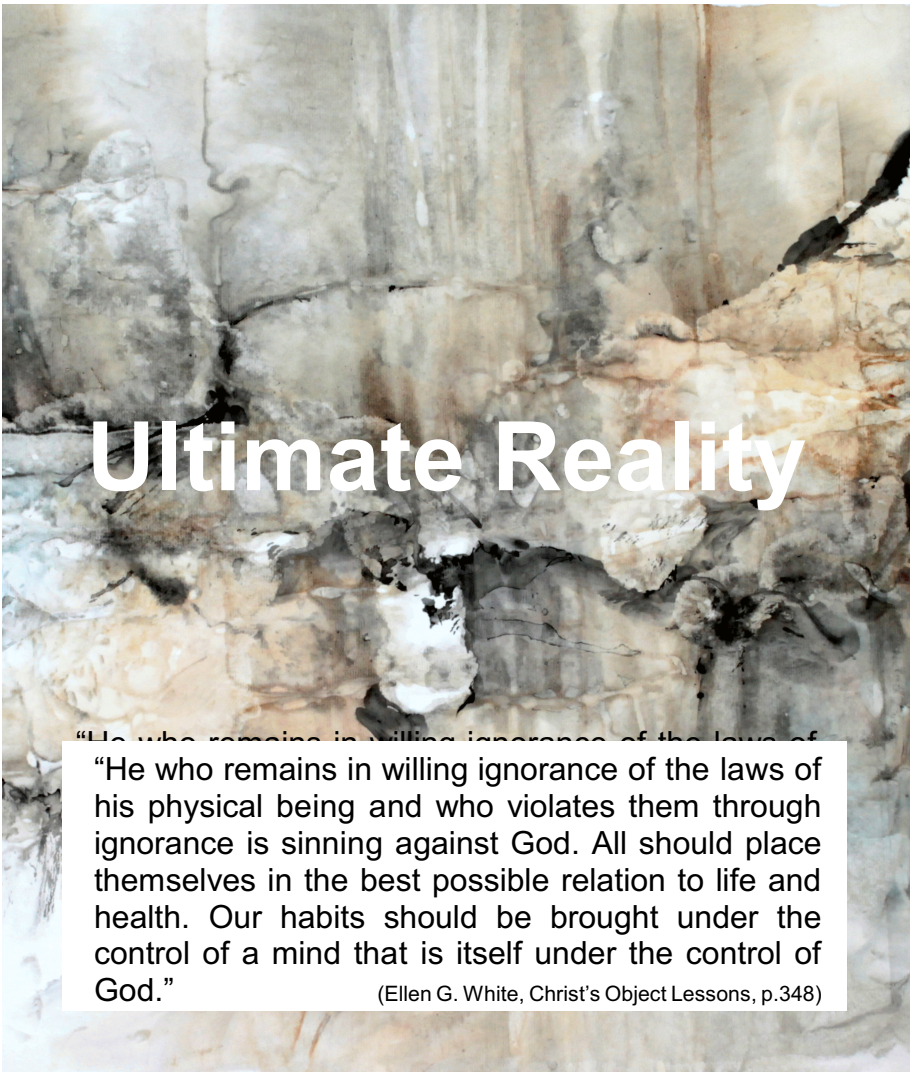
— Week Fourteen —



"He who remains in willing ignorance of the laws of his physical being and who violates them through ignorance is sinning against God. All should place themselves in the best possible relation to life and health. Our habits should be brought under the control of a mind that is itself under the control of God." (Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons, p.348)

Step 1

We admitted we were powerless over our hurts, habits, addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable.

On Being Human

> "*What are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?*"
> Psalms 8:4

This question is raised in a Psalm that brings our life and existence and purpose into perspective. It begins by extolling the majesty of the Lord. David looks into the night sky and marvels at God's creative power then raises the question, "what are mere mortals . . ?" What's so special about being human in the great scheme of things - in the vastness of the universe.

In the context of all created things we are but a minuscule speck. Yet, in the following verses of the Psalm, David identifies our place in the created order and the responsibilities that are ours as a consequence of who we are. He says, "Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor." (v.5) That is a bold statement - just a little lower than 'Elohim' (God). At creation God said. "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. . ." (Genesis 1:26) Mankind was not only created to look like but to act like the one who created us.

The Edenic pair were given authority over and responsibility for all other living creatures. That is still humanity's role, a role that has been largely relinquished in favour of exploitation for personal gain. We are accountable to the One who has created and commissioned us. Because we were made in His likeness, there is an expectation that we will act in His likeness. To be truly human is to emulate the character of our Creator and Saviour, Jesus Christ who loved us and valued us so much that He became one with us, took upon Himself our physical nature so that He could impart to us His spiritual nature - that, again, we would be like Him.

> "O LORD, what are human beings that you should notice them, mere mortals that you should think about them?" (Psalms 144:3)

The Mirror Doesn't Lie

> "*For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like.*"
>
> James 1:23-24

A mother and daughter were staying at a friends house over night while the father was away. A picture of Jesus was hanging on the wall over the head of the bed that they slept in. Against the opposite wall, was a dressing table with a large mirror. When the young girl woke in the morning she saw the picture of Jesus reflected in the mirror. She sat up to get a better look but instead of seeing Jesus she saw herself. When she lay down again she could see Jesus. Then she said, "Mummy, when I can't see myself, I can see Jesus; but every time I see myself, I don't see Him."

James likens the word of God to a mirror. The more closely we look into it the more we perceive the imperfections of our character. We see that our lives do not reflect or mirror the life modelled by Christ or the standard of practice set by Him to guide our behaviour and relations. There are two responses we can make when we come face to face with the reality of our imperfect lives. We can walk away disappointed, discouraged, depressed and even disgusted. Or we can invite the divine beauticians to work a radical make-over in our lives. What happens is that they apply the healing balm of comforting grace. This penetrates deeply into our being, opening up the pathways for the transforming, sanctifying power of the divine presence to work on the damaged inner structures of our thoughts and intents. It is in the unifying presence of the divine nature that we find completeness and personal fulfilment.

> "Oh, that my actions would consistently reflect your decrees! Then I will not be ashamed when I compare my life with your commands." (Psalms 119:5-6)

What's Gone Wrong

The Reality of Broken Relationships

> "It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore." Isaiah 59:2

Isaiah paints a grim picture of man's failure in chapter fifty-nine. But it begins and ends with assurance and hope even in the midst of estrangement, denial, disillusionment and despair. It describes a sad situation of blind discontent, evil surmising and injustice but also introduces a covenant keeping Redeemer who remains faithful and ready to save those who turn from transgression (see V. 20).

In the sun-drenched country of Australia, in the land of the 'Slip, Slap Slop' slogan, it's hard to accept that there is extensive vitamin D deficiency within the population, but that is the reality. In an attempt to prevent skin cancer they have blocked the healthful benefits of the sun. In the spiritual realm we have avoided the warming rays of God's love, our sins are like a sun screen blocking the benefits of bathing in the brightness of His glorious presence. Sin brings shame and shame is the barrier that blocks the vitamin D of deliverance, development and delight.

D_1 - Deliverance - the being born again experience when we are fed the milk of the word, the message of God's grace (see 1 Peter 2:2). (D_1 is a compound found in breast milk).

D_2 - Development - A daily diet of God's word is needed for character growth. God says, "My words have I put in your mouth", Jesus, the Word made flesh says, "take eat; this is my body" (Isa.59:21; Mark 14:22) (D_2 is found in foods).

D_3 - Delight - The Sun of Righteousness brings healing, freedom and joy (Malachi 4:2) (D_3 - from sunlight on the skin)

> "Listen! The LORD's arm is not too weak to save you, nor is his ear too deaf to hear you call." (Isaiah 59:1)

Living in the Real World

> "*When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.*" Romans 5:12

"Humanity is locked in a millennia-old battle to the death with diseases . . ." So writes the Guardian writer, Nicky Woolf, in an article headlined with the words "**Ebola isn't the big one. So what is? And are we ready for it?**" Much is now known about infectious diseases and how to prevent their spread. But despite all human efforts to stamp out infectious diseases, new resistant strains, more virulent mutations appear that threaten to reek havoc of pandemic proportions.

The contagion of sin entered this world through a breach of a simple prevention protocol. Adam and Eve had been warned to avoid a particular tree. A tree that appeared to be "good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom" (Genesis 3:6 NIV) or so the serpent said. He didn't tell them the fact that the fruit was addictive.

The contagion of sin is easily transmitted from person to person or through other environmental influences. It can also be vertically transmitted from parent to child much like the human herpes virus 6 (HHV-6). This virus can slip its genome into the human genome and be transmitted through conception to the offspring, bringing with it the possibility of life threatening disease. Similarly the propensity to sin has spread to all mankind and, unless treated, will result in death - eternal death.

But, thankfully and gratefully, there is an effective remedy for the sin problem. There is a healer who has the antibodies to resist and counteract our inherited and acquired sin sickness. It is the precious blood of Jesus that cleanses away the contamination of sin (see 1 John 1:7). Paul writes,

> "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:22 NKJV)

It's Not a Question of Blame

> "*His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*"
>
> John 9:2 NIV

In asking this question, the disciples were reflecting the debatable belief that such conditions were a consequence of sin. Those who would place blame on the parents would likely quote from the second commandment which says, "punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (Exodus 20:5 NIV). Those of the opposite view would likely quote from Ezekiel 18:20 which says, "The child will not be punished for the parent's sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child's sins. . . . wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness." Jesus rejected both arguments by saying, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned". Instead this was an opportunity for the display of God's power in his life (see John 9:3 NIV).

Jesus makes it clear that His mission was to save, not condemn; to express God's grace not to accuse; to bring hope and healing, not harm. He explained this to Nicodemus the time he came to Him by night (see John 3:17). The question isn't one of blame but one of response. What is our response to the situation we find ourselves in right now. The past we cannot change, the future is still an unknown, the question is how we respond to the present and in the presence of He who is the light, the way, the truth and the life.

Jesus brought light to the blindman who immediately acknowledged the one who healed him, believed and worshipped Him. The Psalmist says:-

> "Send out your light and your truth; let them guide me. Let them lead me to your holy mountain, to the place where you live." (Psalm 43:3)

From A Position of Powerlessness

> "*He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless*." Isaiah 40:29

Each of us begin life from a position of powerlessness. As babes we were totally dependent on the provision and protection of our parents and, more specifically, the nurture and nourishment of our mothers. It was to this position of total dependence that Jesus pointed Nicodemus when He told him, "You must be born again." (John 3:7)

Jesus responded to a question put by the disciples about greatness in God's kingdom by emphasizing the need for humility and childlike faith as a prerequisite for entry into that kingdom. The Biblical record of this encounter (see Matthew 18) tells us that Jesus then went on to tell a parable of the one lost sheep in the context of His purpose and mission - to seek and save the lost. He was moved with compassion for the crowds that followed Him "because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matthew 9:36)

It is only when we acknowledge our helplessness and powerlessness that we can be rescued. Paul puts it this way, "When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners." (Romans 5:6) Paul, himself, had a humbling 'thorn in the flesh' that he had asked for deliverance from. But the Lord said to him, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) He was then able to say, "I take pleasure in my weaknesses, . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong." (V.10) Yes, we all have weaknesses we are seemingly powerless over. But, like a babe, when we cry, there is One who can and will meet our every need. He says:-

> "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Building on Rock Bottom Reality

> "*For who is God except the LORD? Who but our God is a solid rock?* " Psalms 18:31

Edward Mote is remembered for the words of the well-known nineteenth century hymn, "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less". Born to godless parents at the end of the eighteenth century, he grew up not knowing that God existed. It wasn't until he was apprenticed to a Christian cabinet maker that he was exposed to the Word of God and became a Christian.

Edward continued his career as a cabinet maker and it so happened that one morning as he walked to work the words to the chorus of a hymn came to mind, "On Christ the Solid Rock I stand, All other ground is sinking sand."

But Edward was not the first to refer to divinity as a rock. Jacob, on his dying bed spoke of Joseph being strengthened by "the Mighty One . . . the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel" (Genesis 40:24) The Bible is dotted with references to God as the eternal Rock and the firm foundation on which to safely build. (Isaiah 26:4; 1 Peter 5:10) Jesus identified himself as that Rock when he was telling the parable of the two builders. He said, "Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock." (Matthew 7:24) Paul described the journey of the children of Israel and spoke of "the spiritual rock that travelled with them, and that rock was Christ." (1 Corinthians 10:4)

When we have a 'rock bottom' experience, let us remember that it is at that point we can find a secure footing on Christ, the solid Rock. Let us fortify our lives with the teachings of Jesus and make them the foundation of our lives.

> "The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock."
>
> (Matthew 7:25 NIV)

— Week Fifteen —

The Greater Power

"The Lord Jesus is our efficiency in all things; His Spirit is to be our inspiration; and as we place ourselves in His hands to be channels of light, our means of doing good will never be exhausted; for the resources of the power of Jesus Christ are to be at our command." (Ellen G. White, To Be Like Jesus, p.344)

Step 2

Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

The Almighty

> "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty*." Revelation 1:8 NKJV

What a declaration of identity! John was imprisoned on the Island of Patmos when he was given the dramatic series of visions that constitute the book of Revelation. In it is revealed the greatness and glory of God as expressed in and through Jesus Christ. Let's respectfully consider each of the appellations presented in this declaration.

Alpha and Omega - He who is the Word, the Author of all things, the creator of the code of life within us, "the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2 KJV) We are because He is the Alpha and Omega of our existence. As Paul says, "For in him we live and move and exist." (Acts 17:28)

The Beginning and the End - "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." (Ecclesiastes 3:11NIV) He who has created the dimension of time asks us to take time to ponder not only our presence in time but also the prospect of eternity.

Who is, was and is to come - "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore." (Revelation1:18 NKJV) "So [we] also must consider [ourselves] dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:11 ESV, rendered in the first person)

The Almighty - Elihu, the friend of Job, says, "We cannot imagine the power of the Almighty; but even though he is just and righteous, he does not destroy us." (Job 37:23)

> "Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty." (Palms 91:1)

El-Shaddai

> "*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am El-Shaddai—'God Almighty.' Serve me faithfully and live a blameless life.*" Genesis 17:1

Abraham was very old. Sarah, his wife, was barren and well past the child bearing age. Thirteen years earlier, Ishmael had been born to Hagar, Sarah's maidservant and Abraham thought that he would be his heir. But El-Shaddai - God Almighty had other plans, plans that would reveal that He is the God of the impossible.

What the Lord proposed was actually laughable. So hilarious was the proposition that Abraham fell on His face with laughter. A short time later the Lord again reiterated the same promise and Sarah also laughed at the proposition. But it was the Lord who had the last laugh when Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac. Now this was the name the Lord had told Abraham was to be the child's name, a name that means 'to laugh'. The Almighty had the last laugh by doing the impossible, by demonstrating His omnipotence.

There is one other Biblical character who had a real encounter with the Almighty, and that is Job. Thirty-one of the forty-eight occurrences of 'Shaddai' in the Bible are found in Job. He and his so called friends constantly refer to the Almighty in their discourse. Job's friend, Zophar, raises the rhetorical question, "Can you solve the mysteries of God? Can you discover everything about the Almighty?" (Job 11:7) That is beyond us. The more we discover about His power, the more mysteries come to light. Elihu, another friend of Job's, declared, "Stop and consider the wonderful miracles of God!" (Job 37:14). Just for a few moments, let us ponder, indeed revel in the wonders of existence.

> "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words?" (Job 38:2)

Beyond Imagination

> "*We cannot imagine the power of the Almighty; but even though he is just and righteous, he does not destroy us.*" Job 37:23

Albert Einstein postulated in his theories of relativity that there was mass-energy equivalence. He expressed this in what has become the worlds most famous equation, $E=mc^2$. We use energy from matter on a daily basis to drive our cars, light our homes and cook our food. Plants take energy from the sun and produce energy rich foods that we eat to power our lives. But these processes only reflect a infinitesimal amount of potential energy within matter.

The potential energy bound in the mass of a grain of rice could send a space shuttle 569km into the air. If we could extract all the energy from the paper of a small booklet we could power a city of over one and a half million people for over three months. It is estimated that only a pea sized quantity of uranium was converted to energy in the explosion that destroyed Hiroshima back in 1945.

When we consider the immense amount of energy being constantly released from the billions of billions of stars within the universe we stand with incomprehensible wonder and awe at the power of the creator who by His might and power spoke all things into existence.

When we look into the heavens through powerful telescopes we can view the splendour of distant galaxies and nebulae. Such visions are only matched by the microscopic mysteries of the minutest of things, the workings and wonders of sub-atomic particles. And yet Paul can declare, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

> "Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?" (Job 40:2)

All Power

> "*And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.*"
>
> Matthew 28:18 KJV

When we think of it, this is a stupendous statement of Jesus. 'All power', or 'All authority' as most translations render it, belongs to the one who set aside His "divine privileges . . . humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." (Philippians 2:7-8)

Paul continues with a most glorious picture of the risen Christ. He writes, "Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Vs. 9-11)

In another letter, Paul explains that "Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God" to those who believe in Him (1 Corinthians 1:24). Paul continues, "This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength." (V.25) This 'foolish plan of God' saw divinity entering the world of humanity to demonstrate the power of divine love to draw mankind back to Himself, to rest authority for this domain of God's creation back from the hands of the usurper. John heard this heavenly declaration, "It has come at last—salvation and power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down . . ." (Revelation 12:10) Let us take heart for "the gospel [Good News] of Christ . . . is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16 NKJV)

> "For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him." (Philippians 2:13)

He's Able

> "*Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.*" Ephesians 3:20

God is personally present with us, His power penetrates our person to protect our lives and perfect our characters. Paul expressed it this way to the Athenians, "In Him we live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:28 NIV) God is our all in all (see 1 Corinthians 15:28).

Our Protector - "The LORD says, "I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name."" (Psalm 91:14)

Our Provider - No better illustration of this is given than the ram provided by God and that Abraham sacrificed in place of his son, Isaac. Abraham called that place, "Yahweh-Yireh (which means "the LORD will provide")" (Genesis 22:14) Solomon built the Temple on this mount. Christ's death sentence was pronounced on this mount. It was within sight of this mount that Jesus, the Lamb of God gave His life that we might live

A Personal Presence - Jesus, just before His final ascension said, "And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) David expressed this experience with these words, "So now I can walk in your presence, O God, in your life-giving light." (Psalms 56:13) That light will be abundant in the New Jerusalem because God and the Lamb are the light of it.

Lord, lead us into your light, release us from the shackles of our sin, enfold us in your love for we are your children.

> "We know that God's children do not make a practice of sinning, for God's Son holds them securely, and the evil one cannot touch them." (1 John 5:18)

Saving Power

> "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes . . .*" Romans 1:16 NIV

The power of God is revealed in the Gospel. The Gospel is the good news that God has implemented His plan to rescue and redeem mankind from the bondage of lives racked with guilt and shame. The good news is clearly revealed in the life of Jesus and expressed in His declaration, "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him." (John 3:16-17)

The key to accessing saving power is belief. It is more than a belief that simply acknowledges a fact, it is a belief that connects the believer to the believable. It is an entering into the warm embrace of God's everlasting, saving love. A love that saw our Saviour willingly suffer the shame and the pain of the cross so that we could be partakers of His divine, sinless nature and glory.

"All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance - an inheritance that is kept in heaven for [us], pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And through [our] faith, God is protecting [us] by his power until [we] receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see." (1Peter 1:3-5 rendered in the first person)

> "I have not kept the good news of your justice hidden in my heart; I have talked about your faithfulness and saving power. I have told everyone . . . of your unfailing love and faithfulness." (Psalms 40:10)

Transforming Power

> "*He will take our weak mortal bodies and change* [transform] *them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control*." Philippians 3:21

Paul is here speaking of the miraculous make-over that we can and will experience as we submit our lives to the skill of the divine author of our being. He will take our inherited and cultivated weaknesses and transform us into new beings.

Simon Peter, the apostle, in the first chapter of his second letter reminds us of the character transformation that we will experience "as [we] grow in [the] knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord." (V.2) He reminds us of God's divine power that makes it possible for us to share His divine nature, to become like Him as we respond to God's promises. (Vs.3-4) He suggests that we supplement our faith with moral purity; an understanding of the divine will; mastery over our desires and passions; the practice of patience and purposeful endurance; an attitude of reverential respect toward God and kindly concern and compassion for His children - all brought together through the bonds of unconditional love (Vs.5-7).

"While the wind is itself invisible, it produces effects that are seen and felt. So the work of the Spirit upon the soul will reveal itself in every act of him who has felt its saving power. When the Spirit of God takes possession of the heart, it transforms the life. Sinful thoughts are put away, evil deeds are renounced; love, humility, and peace take the place of anger, envy, and strife. Joy takes the place of sadness, and the countenance reflects the light of heaven. No one sees the hand that lifts the burden, or beholds the light descend from the courts above. The blessing comes when by faith the soul surrenders itself to God. Then that power which no human eye can see creates a new being in the image of God." (Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, p.173)

— Week Sixteen —

Accepting God's Care

"As you make a full surrender of your will to God's will, your way to God's way, you will learn of Him who is meek and lowly in heart, and will find rest unto your soul. A calm confidence will preside over you.... You will experience more and more clearly the sense of an ever-present, all-pervading Saviour. This will give the soul power ..., which the changing circumstances of earth cannot undermine. It plants the feet upon a solid rock." (Ellen G. White, Lift Him, Up, p.252)

Step 3

Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Does Jesus Care?

> "*Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. The disciples woke him up, shouting, "Teacher, don't you care that we're going to drown?"* " Mark 4:38

Life is not always smooth sailing. Sometimes we hit the doldrums and at other times we are savaged by raging storms and we despair at the outcome. The disciples felt this that night on Galilee when the raging storm threatened to sink their boat and they were frustrated that Jesus could just sleep there at the stern of the boat apparently oblivious to the danger. Facing the prospect of drowning, they cried out in desperation, "don't you care?"

There are times in our lives when we sink into despondency and despair and cry out, "No one cares about me". We feel ignored, rejected, neglected or relegated to the 'too hard' basket. The words of David reflect our own experience. Like him we cry, "I look for someone to come and help me, but no one gives me a passing thought! No one will help me; no one cares a bit what happens to me." (Psalms 142:4)

In 1901 Frank Graeff, a Methodist Minister, wrote the words to a familiar old hymn that reflect the cry of both the disciples and David, and may even be our own cry.

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained
Too deeply for mirth or song,
As the burdens press, and the cares distress
And the way grows weary and long?

Does Jesus care when I've tried and failed
To resist some temptation strong;
When for my deep grief there is no relief,
Though my tears flow all the night long?

We will learn the answer in tomorrow's devotion, but for now-

> "Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you." (1 Peter 5:7)

Oh Yes He Cares!

> "*And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?*" Matthew 6:30

Each verse of Frank Graeff's hymn, 'Does Jesus Care?', asks that very question in relation to our personal struggles with life issues - our hurts, habits, hang-ups and addictions. But after each verse comes the chorus, the answer to that lingering question, the assurance that lifts our heart and renews our hope.

> Oh yes, He cares, I know He cares,
> His heart is touched with my grief;
> When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,
> I know my Saviour cares.

This assurance is ours as we contemplate the text for today. Jesus says, "He [God] will certainly care for you." Through Isaiah the Lord says, "Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)

But then Jesus, after reassuring us of the certainty of God's care, raises another question for us to answer, "Why do you have so little faith?" In another place he compares us with common sparrows who could be bought cheaply. Despite their apparent worthlessness, God does not forget them. Then Jesus says, "[T]he very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to God than a whole flock of sparrows." (Luke 12:7)

Oh yes, our Saviour cares, but do we care? Do we care enough to listen to Him and follow His instruction?

> " Give your burdens to the LORD, and he will take care of you. . . " (Psalms 55:22)

Christ Came to Care.

> "*And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.*" Philippians 4:19

Jesus entered the synagogue in Nazareth one Sabbath early in His ministry. It was the synagogue He had attended as a child and youth, but now He entered as one on a mission. They handed Him the scroll of Isaiah from which He read a short passage. After reading it He sat down and said, "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!" (Luke 4:21)

Jesus had read a few lines from the beginning of Isaiah 61 which says, "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the LORD's favor has come." (Isaiah 61:1-2)

Jesus had received this commission at His baptism when the Spirit rested on Him in the form of a dove and the voice of God declared His sonship. It was through Christ that God would manifest His loving care for His blind, bound and broken family on earth. He came to supply all our needs from His abundance.

Jesus was in the house of Zacchaeus when he declared, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." (Luke 19:10) His mission was and is to dispense God's love and mercy in a rescue mission for mankind.

> "In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation." (1 Peter 5:10)

Filled With Compassion

> "*When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion. "Don't cry!" he said.*" Luke 7:13

The tragic pictures of a little toddler washed up on a Turkish beach and published in papers, on TV, and on the internet in early September, 2015, brought home to the world the tragic consequences of war. Aylan had drowned at sea, along with his brother and mother, while attempting to flee from the Syrian conflict. These images prompted a global expression of horror and albeit fleeting compassion for those who have perished while attempting to flee tragedy only to become part of the tragedy.

Researcher, Dacher Keltner, states that compassion is "part of human nature, rooted in our brain and biology, and ready to be cultivated for the greater good." (The Compassionate Instinct, March 1, 2004) Compassion is built into our being as a part of the image of God bestowed on mankind at creation. The Lord revealed Himself to Moses as "The God of compassion and mercy! . . . filled with unfailing love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6)

This same compassionate Lord entered this world as a babe and grew up to be the compassionate Messiah. It was just outside the village of Nain that He met a widow who was attending the burial of her only son. Jesus 'heart overflowed with compassion' when He saw the grief on her face. Not only had she lost her young son but she had lost her only hope of support. Compassion welled up within Christ compelling Him to respond to the tragedy. He touched the coffin and spoke life into the widow's son. "Young man," he said, "I tell you, get up." (Luke 7:14) This same Jesus says to us, "come unto me . . . and I will give you rest".

> "The LORD is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love."
>
> (Psalms 145:8)

The Gentle Caregiver

> "*He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.*" Isaiah 40:11

The Abrahamic line were graziers by occupation. Genesis describes the somewhat nomadic nature of these shepherds and herdsmen as they sought fodder for their flocks and herds. It is little wonder that they used grazier terms in describing and understanding God's care. The first use of the word 'shepherd' as a title for God is found in the blessing given to Joseph by Jacob as he approached the end of his life. He acknowledged God as the 'Mighty One of Jacob', the 'Shepherd' and the 'Rock' of Israel.

King David commenced his career as a shepherd. Out of that experience he penned what is the best known of all Psalms, the Shepherd's Psalm. In it he speaks of the Lord's nurture and care in ways that bring comfort to those who are facing the struggles and wants of life.

Isaiah, in the messianic message for today, applies the shepherd motif to the 'Sovereign Lord' (V.10) who will come as the caring shepherd of His flock. Jesus, the Messiah takes this motif and rightly applies it to Himself. He declared, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (John10:11) He doesn't run away from the responsibility to do what ever is needed to save His sheep, even to voluntarily dying to save us from our own failings. (V.18) Our 'good shepherd says, "Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:29) The gentle caregiver wants us to be one with Him in gentleness and humility - receiving it and then willingly imparting it.

> "Is God's comfort too little for [us]? Is his gentle word not enough?" (Job 15:11 rendered in the first person)

Knowing He Cares

> "*I myself taught Israel how to walk, leading him along by the hand. But he doesn't know or even care that it was I who took care of him.*" Hosea 11:3

The Lord, in Hosea chapter eleven, laments the determined waywardness of the children of Israel despite the clear evidence of His love and leading in their journey. He declares, "I led Israel along with my ropes of kindness and love. I lifted the yoke from his neck, and I myself stooped to feed him. . . My people are determined to desert me. They call me the Most High, but they don't truly honor me. Oh, how can I give you up, Israel? How can I let you go? . . . My heart is torn within me, and my compassion overflows." (Vs.4, 7-8)

The second phrase of the chorus of 'Does Jesus Care?' says, "I know he cares". The question comes to us, "Do we care that He cares?" Is there a stubborn streak of self-will, a wall of resistance in us that is preventing us from fully accepting the leading of the Lord? Do we harbour doubts that foster distrust? Have we let fears and phobias fill us with uncertainty and dread, and strip us of any semblance of confidence in the leading of the Lord? Could the picture of our lives and our understanding and relationship with God in some way resemble that painted by Hosea?

To know that God cares places an obligation upon us to share His care. It isn't in the practice of the rituals of religion that we achieve this. No level of piousness, penitence or humility will suffice to show that we share God's compassion and care for others. Our knowledge of God's care is evidenced by acts of caring (see Isaiah 58). The Lord says:-

> "Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help." (Isaiah 58:7)

Safe In His Care

"*. . . I am writing to all who have been called by God the Father, who loves you and keeps you safe in the care of Jesus Christ*." Jude 1:1

One day in the spring of 1868 the industrialist and composer, W. Howard Doane visited the prolific blind poet, Fanny Crosby with an urgent request. He had but forty minutes before he was to catch a train to Cincinnati but he wanted words to a melody that he had composed. After about twenty minutes of contemplation, Fanny recited the comforting words of 'Safe in the Arms of Jesus' to Howard who hurriedly wrote them down before heading off to catch his train. This hymn carries a message of assurance and comfort and has been the source of solace to many over the years since its publication. Meditate on the message of this excerpt.

Safe in the arms of Jesus, Safe from corroding care,
Safe from the world's temptations,
Sin cannot harm me there.
Free from the blight of sorrow,
Free from my doubts and fears;
` Only a few more trials, Only a few more tears!

Safe in the arms of Jesus, safe on His gentle breast
There by His love o'ershaded,
sweetly my soul shall rest.

He who came as a helpless babe to be cradled in the arms of Mary; this same Jesus who was cradled on a cross as the Lamb of God, is now our risen Saviour and the Shepherd of our souls. Yes, we can safely rest in the caring arms of the Good Shepherd, Jesus. He lifts the burden of guilt and shame, restores our soul and gives us hope again. In Him we find safety and assurance, comfort and care.

"Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise." (Hebrews 10:23)

— Week Seventeen —

Serious Soul Searching

"Our work is that of heart-searching, of self-abasement, and confession of sin, each humbling his own soul before God, and seeking pardon for himself individually. . . . If each will search and see what sins are lurking in his own heart to shut out Jesus, he will find such a work to do that he will be ready to esteem others better than himself. He will no longer seek to pluck the mote out of his brother's eye while a beam is in his own eye."

(E.G. White, Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists, p. 213.3)

Step 4

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

The Deceitful Heart

> "*The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?*" Jeremiah 17:9

Jeremiah, those are strong words! They are cutting words, but at the same time so very true. There are times when we all, intentionally or unintentionally, act or speak deceitfully. Let us not deceive ourselves with any pious notion that we are free from any acts of deception. It is one of the vile things that Jesus listed as coming from the heart that can defile us (see Mark 7:21-23).

"Stop deceiving yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you need to become a fool to be truly wise", Paul says, and then he goes on to quote from Job's friend, Eliphaz, who says, "He [God] traps the wise in the snare of their own cleverness." (1 Corinthians 3:18-19; Job 5:13)

Deceitfulness takes many forms. There is the obvious cheating but what about acts of clever craftiness? There is blatant dishonesty but what about double-dealing and duplicity? We frown on fraud but what if we're just 'faking it', just bluffing our way through life? What about the politically correct platitudes that we use to feign friendliness?

When we consider these few examples we come to realize that out of our hearts and minds flow words, intentions and acts that reflect the deceptive, distorted and sometimes deluded nature of our thinking. Irrational thoughts come to all of us at times. Perpetuating patterns of twisted thinking can drag us down into a state of despair or depression. Let's face these negative thoughts. Let's be honest and heed Peter's advice.

> "So get rid of all evil behaviour. Be done with all deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech." (1Peter 2:1)

Mirror, Mirror . . .

> "*Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.*"
>
> 1 Corinthians 13:12

Mirrors! Those essential reflective surfaces that convey information about things that are not directly before us. We use them constantly to navigate through heavy traffic and to monitor things out of our direct vision. They form parts of instruments in industry, science, astronomy and medicine. But they are most often used to look at ourselves. Yes, and we use multiple mirrors to view ourselves from every angle.

The Word of God is like a mirror or, could we say, a set of mirrors. At least, that's what James, the brother of Jesus, suggests. Let's take our Bibles right now and read what he says in James 1:21-25. The mirror not only shows us what we need to get rid of but it also offers us the key to unlock the trap of lukewarm indolence and indifference that hinders us from reaching our God given potential.

The nineteenth century Danish philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, is quoted as saying, "Look at yourself in the mirror, not at the mirror." Let's look at what God's Word reveals about us. Yes, we may see the dirt and grime of life that needs to be cleaned up, but, more than that, we need to look deeper and see that God sees us as His precious children for whom He was prepared to die. Let's look at Jesus until we see Him in us and us in Him. It is in so doing that we will begin to "see everything with perfect clarity".

> "Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is." (1 John 3:2)

What Went Wrong

> "*I think of the good old days, long since ended, when my nights were filled with joyful songs. I search my soul and ponder the difference now*." Psalms 77:5-6

Asaph, the author of Psalm 77, expresses the sentiments of one who feels rejected, ignored and abandoned. He longs for a restoration of relationship with God and raises six questions that reflect the fatalistic feelings he is experiencing. As we explore Asaph's questions (Vs.7-9), let us consider how we respond to challenges to relationships.

Has the Lord rejected me forever? "It's your sins that have cut you off from God", Isaiah tells us (59:2). Jesus took our sins to the cross and experienced abandonment for us when He cried, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matthew 27:46)

Will he never again be kind to me? Nehemiah tells us that God is "Abundant in kindness" but we need to abandon our rebellion (9:17; cf. Ezekiel 18:31)

Is his unfailing love gone forever? The Lord says, "I have loved you . . . with an everlasting love." (Jeremiah 31:3) Can we experience His love when we disobey Him?

Have his promises permanently failed? "O Lord, you . . . always fulfill your covenant and keep your promises of unfailing love to those who love you and obey your commands." (Daniel 9:4) Do we love and obey Him?

Has God forgotten to be gracious? "The LORD . . . is gracious to the humble." (Proverbs 3:34) Have we forgotten to be humble?

Has he slammed the door on his compassion? "The LORD must wait for you to come to him so he can show you his love and compassion." (Isaiah 30:18)

> "We have nothing to fear for the future except as we may forget the way God has led us in the past."
>
> (E.G. White, Believe His Prophets, p.135)

The Matter of a Log

"*And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?*" Luke 6:41

In the sermon on the mount Jesus laid out many principles for godly living. Our text for today comes from that sermon and illustrates a particular directive He wanted to emphasize. He said, "Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven." (Luke 6:37)

The story is told of a lady who bought some very mature cheese, placed it in her bag and continued shopping in other stores. As she shopped she was aware of a rather repugnant smell which she assumed was the body odour of the shop assistants. She thought, "How can they maintain their positions?" When she opened her bag, she discovered that she was the one responsible for the offensive smell - the very mature cheese!

Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the focus of our attention is not to be on the failings of others but, rather, on our own shortcomings. Remember how He dealt with the Pharisees who were trying to trap Him by asking Him to adjudicate in a case of a woman caught in adultery. They said, "The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?" He responded by saying, ". . . let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" (John 8:3-11)

Don't be too harsh with the one who sins,
Nor pelt him with word or stone,
Unless you are sure, yes, doubly sure,
That you have no sins of your own. —Anon.

Let these salient words sink in and become a guiding principle for us not only for today but for every day.

"Do to others as you would like them to do to you."
(Luke 6:31)

Search Me, O God

> "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts*." Psalms 139:23

When we read the Psalms of king David we find that this warrior was also, at times, a worrier. But he also wrote as a therapist for worriers. Drawing from his own experience he throws light on the state of the troubled mind. And Psalm 38 is a prime example. In this Psalm David points out the damaging and demoralizing nature of guilt, shame, rejection, persecution and denial. He clearly understands the cause of his anxiety neurosis and admits it. He says, "For I confess my iniquity; I am full of anxiety because of my sin." (Psalms 38:18 NASB) And then he cries out, "Come quickly to help me, O Lord my savior." (V.22)

In contrast, Psalm 37 offers a remedy for the troubled heart. He begins with the words, "Don't worry (or fret or get agitated)". He admonishes us to "Trust in the Lord and do good" (V.3)and to "be still in the presence of the Lord" (V.7). He acknowledges the need for anger management with the words, "Stop being angry! Turn from your rage! Do not lose your temper—it only leads to harm." (V.8) He suggests that we actively replace bad habits with good habits. He says, "Turn from evil and do good" (V.27) This is a process that is not unlike modern day Cognitive Behavioural Therapy whereby a person identifies negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours and replaces them with positive responses.

Then David adds a proverbial truism, "It is better to be godly and have little than to be evil and rich." (V.16) As we allow the Lord to search our hearts, as we listen to His counsel and develop a trusting relationship with Him, we will be ready to say, "Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life." (Psalm 139:24)

> "Put your hope in the LORD. Travel steadily along his path." (Psalm 37:34)

Poverty of Soul

> "*You say, 'I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.*" Revelation 3:17

What an eye opener it is when we come to understand that who we are has little or nothing to do with the things we possess, our social status, or our personal achievements but more to do with our character. In our text for today, Jesus presents five factors that describe the reality of those who depend on things to give them meaning.

Wretched - Paul identifies the sinful nature as the cause of our wretched state, a state of slavery to sin (Romans 7:24-25) What is the solution to wretchedness? Paul says, "Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves." (Galatians 5:16)

Miserable - "How miserable I am!" Micah says as he considers the pointlessness of all his efforts. He says, "Don't trust anyone—not your best friend or even your wife!" Then he says, "As for me, I look to the LORD for help." (Study Micah 7:1-7 NIV)

Poor - It is only as we acknowledge our spiritual poverty that the Lord can "supply all [our] needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus." (Matthew 5:3; Philippians 4:19)

Blind - David speaks of the "blind conceit" of blatant sinfulness (Psalms 36:1-3). Peter compares a failure to cultivate Christlikeness to shortsightedness or blindness. (2 Peter 1:5-9)

Naked - We cannot hide anything from God. "Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable." (Hebrews 4:13)

> "All who are victorious will be clothed in white." (Revelation 3:5)

The Futility of Self Justification

> "The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:29

It was an 'expert in religious law' who asked Jesus the question, "And who is my neighbor?" He had wanted to test Jesus' views on the topic of eternal life and how to obtain it. Jesus responded to his question with another question, "What does the law of Moses say?" In his response the lawyer identified the command to love God wholeheartedly and to "Love your neighbor as yourself." (V.27) Jesus said, "Do this and you will live!" (V.28) Then, in an attempt at self-justification, the lawyer asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

We've all done it, tried to justify our actions, excuse our failings, or deny our motives. We pass the buck, play the blame game, make excuses, or wiggle and worm our way out of any responsibility for what has happened. We might be able to fool some people some of the time (and this is dangerously self-deceiving) but we have to admit that we cannot fool God even though we may try.

The Bible gives us examples of prominent people who tried to justify themselves. Adam blamed God and Eve for his sin, and Eve blamed the Devil. Aaron blamed the people for his decision to make a golden idol for them to worship. King Saul couldn't wait for Samuel and then blamed him and the people for his disobedience.

Jesus told a parable about a pharisee and a tax collector praying in the temple. The pharisee sought to justify himself by praying, "I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like . . . that tax collector!" (Luke 18:11) Trying to justify ourselves by comparing ourselves with others doesn't wash. It is only in honestly and humbly admitting our mistakes that we can be justified through the merits of Jesus.

> "For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin." (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

— Week Eighteen —

Altering Our Understanding

“Confess your sins to God, who only can forgive them, and your faults to one another. If you have given offense to your friend or neighbor, you are to acknowledge your wrong, and it is his duty freely to forgive you. Then you are to seek the forgiveness of God, because the brother you have wounded is the property of God, and in injuring him you sinned against his Creator and Redeemer.”

(E.G. White, The Faith I Live By, p.128)

Step 5

Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

We Got It Wrong

> "*And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.*" James 4:3

Like the troubled eddies where two streams meet and mix, misconceptions arise from the confluence of faulty perceptions, incorrect or inadequate information and mistaken motives. The context of today's scripture speaks to the cause of quarrels and fights. It identifies evil desires as that which activates unholy intentions and causes swirling eddies of misunderstanding.

If we were to hear that a substance that could cause severe burns and corrosion, that was a powerful industrial solvent and was also implicated in many fatalities and disasters would be readily available for children at a school fare, would we be concerned? If we were told that the substance was dihydrogen monoxide would we still be concerned? But if we were told that this substance would be provided free for the children to drink and to quench their thirst we would know that it was only water. To prevent misconceptions it's important to have all the facts and to have them straight.

But even having the facts straight is not enough to come to the correct conclusion. A shoe manufacturer sent two salesmen to an undeveloped country to explore the marketing possibility. One e-mailed back: "Prospect poor. No one wears shoes." The other reported, "potential terrific! Everyone is barefooted." In life's situations it is always wise to consider things from all perspectives - particularly the other persons.

And then we come to our motives and desires. James makes it clear that we ought to humbly evaluate our motives when we get it wrong.

> "So humble yourselves before God. . . Come close to God, and God will come close to you." (James 4:7-8)

Choosing Change

> "*No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by God's Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people.*"
>
> Romans 2:29

Paul had not yet travelled to Rome but was keen to communicate the fulness of the Gospel to that city, particularly those who had come to a belief in the Messiah, Jesus. There were two distinct groups of believers in Rome, those of Jewish descent and those who were converts to Christianity from the gentiles, and differences had arisen between them particularly those relating to Jewish rites and practices. The message of Paul is clear, we need a change of heart - a heart that is right with God.

Like one who is to have life saving heart transplant surgery, we may ask, "What are the implications? How will it affect the way I think, my behaviour and who I am?" Paul clarifies the concept in a later chapter when he tells us, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." (12:2)

The Lord has remained faithful to His covenant of promise which He made with Israel at Sinai. At that time Moses, like Paul, reminded Israel that, when they should respond to His invitation to return to Him, He would give them new hearts that are ready to choose life. "The LORD your God will change your heart . . . so that you will love him with all your heart and soul and so you may live!" (Deuteronomy 30:6).

> "You can make this choice by loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. This is the key to life" (Deuteronomy 30:20)

Proofreading Our Preconceptions

> "*I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.*" Philippians 3:7

Proofreading is an essential part of the printing industry that requires certain conditions, tools and methods to be effective. We can take some of these requirements and apply them to the evaluation of our own preconceptions.

1. Ask another (possibly an accountability partner) for help in evaluating 'our copy'. "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." (James 5:16) Above all, ask God. Say, "Examine me, and probe my thoughts! Test me, and know my concerns!" (Psalms 139:23 NET)
2. Avoid distractions - clear away the clutter of life. Be cool, calm and collected. "The intelligent person restrains his words, and one who keeps a cool head is a man of understanding." (Proverbs 17:27 HCSB)
3. Avoid the heat of the moment - wait until you can revisit the 'chapter' calmly and more objectively.
4. Be thorough - take it step by step. "Let us carefully examine our ways, and let us return to the LORD" (Lamentations 3:40 NET)
5. Do it at least twice - once to test the truth of our preconceptions, then to evaluate the meaning we are drawing from them.
6. Proofread when we are fresh - This was Jesus practice. Take time with God and His word first thing in the morning. (cf. Mark 1:35; Psalms 119:147).
7. Use the Bible as a tool to examine our preconceptions.

   "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." (Psalms 119:11 ESV)

The Fickleness of Our Feelings

> "*A fool vents all his feelings, But a wise man holds them back.*" Proverbs 29:11 NKJV

We were created with feelings. Feelings perform important functions that relate to survival and safety, social interaction, growth and personal development, fulfilment, meaning and the enjoyment of life. But, as we all know, feelings can be a raging fire that consumes, a ticking time bomb ready to explode, or a sudden sinkhole that sucks us into utter despair. The challenges and confrontations, the 'what-ifs', the overwhelming uncertainties and doubts that we experience create an emotional quicksand that we can so easily get trapped in.

"How miserable I am!" Micah declares. He is expressing his feelings of frustration and disappointment at the fruitless results of his labours. He says, "I feel like the fruit picker after the harvest who can find nothing to eat." (Micah 7:1) Then, after bewailing the total absence of godliness, he cries out, "Don't trust anyone—not your best friend or even your wife!" (V.5) We, like Micah, have, may and do experience similar feelings from time to time.

But not all feelings are bad. Happiness can be ours. The Psalmist says, "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! . . . So rejoice in the LORD and be glad, all you who obey him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!" (Psalm 32) We have reason to be freed from the fickle feelings that haunt us because Micah reminds us that the Lord has promised to cast all our failings "into the depths of the ocean!" (Micah 7:19) There is no better feeling than the feeling of being bathed with God's forgiveness and love, and the accompanying release from shame and guilt. We can declare, "Oh, what a feeling!"

> "Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything." (1 John 3:20)

Changing the Way We Think

> "*This is my second letter to you, dear friends, and in both of them I have tried to stimulate your wholesome thinking and refresh your memory.*" 2 Peter 3:1

Peter new something of the need to relinquish long held perceptions and prejudices and develop new thinking patterns. Take the time the Lord had to jolt him out of his culturally driven prejudices with a dream calling him to eat unclean creatures. He got the right message and was able to change his thinking about how he was to relate to people from other ethnic backgrounds. Let's note how he tries to stimulate our wholesome thinking in his two letters.

Think clearly and exercise self-control (1Pet.1:13) - We can choose to change our thinking. Our attitude is our choice. Negativity can cloud our mind and trap us in the blame game. Let's take control of our thinking.

Get rid of all evil behaviour (1Pet.2:1) - Such behaviour includes "deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech."

Keep away from worldly desires (1Pet.2:11) - Paul concurs with this advice, "So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires." (Col.3:5)

Arm yourselves with Christ's attitude (1Pet.4:1) - Again Paul concurs. "You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had . . . he humbled himself in obedience to God" (Phil. 2:5,8; cf.1Pet.5:6)

Give all your worries and cares to God (1Pet.5:7) - Jesus says, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matt.11:28)

Share his divine nature and escape . . . human desires (2Pet.1:4) We will explore this in the next devotional.

> "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 3:18 NIV)

Let This Mind

> "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,*" Philippians 2:5

In the verses that follow our text for today we begin to understand the mindset of Jesus who stepped down from glory, took on humanity, and in obedience to the redemptive plan formed in eternity, humbled himself, and "bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). In this one act is found the most profound expression of divine love and saving grace known to man. And we are admonished to emulate this mindset.

Peter presents a progressively sanctifying process by which we can partake of Christ's divine nature (see 2 Peter 1:5-8). It is the building of character that is founded on faith in the solid rock, Christ Jesus.

The first trait that Peter asks us to work on is our moral values. These address our relational responsibility to abide by the principles behind the Golden Rule, the commandments of Christ. Then, as we listen to, absorb and understand Christ's teaching we will " have an abundance of knowledge." (see Matthew13:12)

These teachings then become the foundation for patient and purposeful mastery over our passions and desires and the development of a life reflective of a reverential respect for God. Such a life abounds in compassion and kindness to all. It becomes a conduit for the love of God that overflows naturally from a transformed heart - a heart that beats in harmony with the heart of God. Paul declares, ""Who can know the LORD's thoughts? Who knows enough to teach him?" But we understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ." (1 Corinthians 2:16)

> "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

New Perceptions

> "*Jesus knew what they were saying, so he said, "Why are you arguing about having no bread? Don't you know or understand even yet? Are your hearts too hard to take it in? 'You have eyes—can't you see? You have ears—can't you hear?' Don't you remember anything at all?*" Mark 8:17-18

The background to these questions was the way the disciples seemed to misconstrue the clear words of Jesus. They had been involved in two miraculous mass feedings. They were present when Jesus had refused to give a miraculous sign of His Messiahship to a group of Pharisees. Now he had warned them about "the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod." (V.15) The disciples misperception of what Jesus was saying prompted this moment of apparent exasperation and the final question, "Don't you understand yet?" (V.21)

Our perceptions of words and events are not always accurate. They are often clouded by our past experiences, cultural influences, distorted perspectives and unrealistic expectations. Like the disciples of Jesus, we can draw wrong conclusions from the facts, misinterpret the intentions of others and then respond inappropriately to the situation. What we really need is a clearer vision, one free from distortions and doubts, a perception of the reality of who Jesus is, what He has done and is doing for us and what He is offering us through His grace.

God has a clear plan for us. Paul tells us about it in Ephesians 1:5-11. Read it, clearly perceive it and accept it.

> "God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. . . . and he makes everything work out according to his plan." (Ephesians 1:5,11LP)

— Week Nineteen —

Dealing With Destructive Desires

"It is in mercy that the Lord reveals to men their hidden defects. He would have them critically examine the complicated emotions and motives of their own hearts, and detect that which is wrong, and modify their dispositions and refine their manners. . . The trials of life are God's workmen to remove the impurities, infirmities, and roughness from our characters, and fit them for the society of pure, heavenly angels in glory." (E.G. White, My Life Today, p.92)

Step 6

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Deceptive Dynamics of Desire

> "*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*" Genesis 3:6 NIV

Eve succumbed to the suggestions of Satan, she saw the forbidden fruit, liked its looks and listened to the lie. Desire got the better of her and she succumbed. Desire nurtured grows quickly into an overwhelming and overpowering drive that breaches every barrier to temptation. There seems to be within our fallen nature a tendency to desire the forbidden, a curiosity for the hidden, an irresistible urge to explore and expand our experience that we find hard to resist.

We see the same story played out in the lives of past and present generations. Speaking of his generation (and ours is no better), Jude wrote, "These people are grumblers and complainers, living only to satisfy their desires. They brag loudly about themselves, and they flatter others to get what they want. . . . scoffers whose purpose in life is to satisfy their ungodly desires." (Jude 1:16,18) And, like Adam and Eve, each generation and individual reaps the consequences of their responses to those hard to manage desires - desires to control and dominate, to indulge and experience, and to get and gain without thought or favour for others. Simply put, selfish, self-centred, self-satisfying desires.

But Paul reminds us that in turning our lives over to the care of God we will see a change in our desires. He says:-

> "You took off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires; you are being renewed in the spirit of your minds; you put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth." (Ephesians 4:22-24 HCSB)

The Devil's Desire

"*And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat:*"
Luke 22:31 KJV

The Devil desires to take us, trip us up, toss us around and torment us. Like Job and like Jesus, we will experience the buffeting of Satan in many and varied ways as he seeks to unsettle, destabilize, delude and discourage us. Let us focus on the Word that warns us of the tricks of his trade.

The Devil deceives through lies - Jesus pulled no punches when He described the Jews as being like their father, the devil. Jesus said, "When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:44) How easy it is for us to live a lie, to twist the truth and so fall into step with the father of deceit.

Dabbles in delusions and deceptions - Paul speaks of "the man of lawlessness" who does the "work of Satan" using "every kind of evil deception to fool" to deceive and to trick the unwary into believing a lie (2 Thess.2:8-11). Do we ever dabble in deception?

Delights in Darkness - "Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God." 2 Cor 4:4

Determined to devour - "Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour." (1Peter 5:8)

Let us stay true to **the Word** so we never hear the words:-

"You are of your father the devil, and you desire to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has not stood in the truth, because there is no truth in him." (John 8:44 fp)

Driven by Desire

> "*I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil.*"
>
> Ecclesiastes 2:10 NIV

Solomon had it made. He followed in the footsteps of a successful father. God had gifted him with wisdom, fame and fortune. But success, popularity and opulence led Solomon to a life of indulgence, disillusionment and, dare we say it, debauchery. It was as he said, "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired."

Desire, whether positive or negative, is a potent power that propels us into action. James explains the propensity of negative desire this way, "Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions." (James 1:14-15) The potential for problems is multiplied when our desires are in conflict (see 4:1). Competing desires struggling for fulfillment can consume our every waking moment and drive us to rash decisions. Even positive desires can get out of balance, can become obsessive and result in negative consequences.

William Hearst, a wealthy publisher and art collector, had an insatiable desire for artistic treasures. One day he heard of a particularly fine item and determined to get it. He sent his agent in search of the treasure. After some months the agent reported that it had been found and it wouldn't cost him a dime because he already owned it. It lay uncrated in his warehouse with many other treasures that had never been opened.

We may satisfy our earthly desires to the point that we think we don't need a thing, little realising that we have discarded the desire of ages, the supplier and sustainer of life.

> "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16 NIV)

The Lord's Deepest Desire

> "*Then He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer*"
> Luke 22:15 NKJV

It was at this meal of remembrance that Jesus demonstrated His eternal love for 'His own' by taking the role of a humble servant and washing the disciples feet. He then instructed them to love each other just as He had loved them.

"Does not the Lord desire that the impenitent shall be saved? Certainly He does. Even one soul is of greater value than the whole world." (E. G. White, Message 29, p.1) He who is the embodiment of truth desires above all that we be saved and sanctified so that we may share in the glorious and perfecting unity of oneness and completeness in the Father and the Son. He longs that, through this unity, we will build bonds of oneness with each other.

Jesus prayed, "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me . . . (John 17:24 NKJV) He had already assured them that He would soon go to prepare a place for them in His Father's house. Then He said, "When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am." (John 14:3)

In addition to this desired but still future reunion, the Lord longs to abide with us now. He told His disciples, "All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them." (V.23) The fulness of the Godhead longs for a harmonious relationship with those who, out of love, obey. Through the indwelling presence of the Spirit of truth, the Helper and Comforter, Christ promises to be present with us (see Vs.16-18).

> "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

Changing the Heart's Desire

> "*Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts. My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you.*" Isaiah26:8-9 NIV

The prophet Jeremiah makes a spiritual diagnosis when he says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 7:9 ESV) This is in stark contrast to the declaration of devotion and desire made by Isaiah in our key text for today. He expresses three essential elements of a changed heart.

Willingness to walk in the Lord's way - Isaiah speaks of waiting and walking in accordance to the Lord's direction. Human nature is to respond impetuously as Alexander Pope put it, "Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread." But Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23 NIV)

Committed to continuing communion - Isaiah speaks of a continuous longing and yearning for God. The psalmist says, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires. Commit everything you do to the LORD. Trust him, and he will help you." (Psalm 37:4-5) Commitment is built on trust.

Living to His honour and glory - Peter and John were uneducated fishermen but when arraigned before the council, the Jewish leaders "were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." (Acts 4:13 NIV) When we invite Christ into our lives, His character will be reproduced in our nature and we will then live to His honour and glory.

> "You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!" (Isaiah 26:3)

Pursuing Positive Desire

> "*They are more desirable than gold, even the finest gold. They are sweeter than honey, even honey dripping from the comb*." Psalms 19:10

What could be more desirable than Gold or sweeter than honey? David tells us of something that is perfect and trustworthy, something that clears away confusion, that is right, true and fair and engenders the purest respect for the Lord. He is describing the Lord's law, His statutes, precepts, commands, decrees and instructions - these positive principles are more desirable than the finest Gold. (Vs.7-9)

He goes on to show how they warn us of the dangers of sinful desires and the sweet reward that is ours when we heed their instruction. There is nothing sweeter than freedom from guilt and shame, and such will be our experience as we pursue the path set before us by His word.

We do well to heed the admonition of Isaiah where he says, "Seek the LORD while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near. . . . and banish the very thought of doing wrong." (Isaiah 55:6-7) The Lord says, "Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life." (V.3) It is as we seek the Lord with a sincere desire for His guidance and a willingness to walk in His ways that we will savour the sweetness of oneness with Him. As James says, " Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. . . . Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor." (James 4:7-8,10)

Why not "Taste and see that the LORD is good." (Ps.24:8)

> "I am always overwhelmed with a desire for your regulations. I have chosen to be faithful; I have determined to live by your regulations. I cling to your laws. . . . I will pursue your commands, for you expand my understanding."
>
> (Psalm 119:20, 30-31FP, 32)

The Beneficence of God's Desire

> "*I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors, for you have given me wisdom and strength. You have told me what we asked of you and revealed to us what the king demanded*." Daniel 2:23

Daniel and his three friends were in trouble. The wise men of Babylon had failed to meet Nebuchadnezzar's demand to not only interpret but to tell him what he had dreamed. In his state of perplexed paranoia, Nebuchadnezzar had ordered the execution of all his wise men, including the recently graduated Hebrews. These men had purposed in their hearts to honor God even in their servitude. God had blessed them with wisdom above all other students, but now their lives were in jeopardy.

Having obtained a little time, Daniel and his friends prayed for a revelation of the kings dream. The Lord revealed the matter to Daniel in a dream and, on waking, praised God for his unfailing beneficence. The dream was told, the interpretation given and the lives of the young Hebrew's along with all the hapless Babylonian wise men were saved.

When we come to realize the patience, forbearance, forgiveness and love of God who has no desire to see anyone perish but who longs for our repentance, respect, gratitude and loving devotion, then, like Daniel, our lips will open in praise, honor and adoration of our creator, redeemer and majestic Lord (see 2 Peter 3:9).

Even Nebuchadnezzar came to acknowledge this. His recorded testimony ends with these word, "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and glorify and honor the King of heaven. All his acts are just and true, and he is able to humble the proud." (Daniel 4:37) Such is the beneficence of God.

> "You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God." (Psalm 51:17)

— Week Twenty —

Correcting Our Motives and Purposes

"Nothing takes so strong a hold upon the affections, nothing reaches so fully down to the deepest motives of action, nothing exerts so potent an influence upon the life, and gives so great firmness and stability to the character, as the religion of Christ. It leads its possessor ever upward, inspiring him with noble purposes, teaching him propriety of deportment, and imparting a becoming dignity to every action."

(E.G. White, Gospel Workers, p.127)

Step 6

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Maladjusted Motives

> "*So my people come pretending to be sincere and sit before you. They listen to your words, but they have no intention of doing what you say. Their mouths are full of lustful words, and their hearts seek only after money*." Ezekiel 33:31

Apparently Ezekiel was a most interesting speaker. The problem was the people found him entertaining but his message meant nothing to them. He was "like someone who sings love songs with a beautiful voice or plays fine music on an instrument." They said, "let's go hear the prophet . . ." but they had no intention of responding to his message. (see Vs.30,32) As we look at this experience we are drawn to wonder whether we are any different.

Solomon made a study of attitudes and motives. He "observed that most people are motivated to success because they envy their neighbors." (Ecclesiastes 4:4) He saw the futility and meaninglessness of 'keeping up with the Jones'. Let's not deny the fact that such a motive does cross our minds or, indeed, drives our actions from time to time.

We may wonder at the motives behind the antisocial behaviour of the graffiti artist, the firebug, or the social deviant. We even question our own motives when we cry out in frustration, "Why did I do that?" Princeton social psychologist, Susan Fiske (2009), suggests that a mix of five core motives drive us. They are: belonging, understanding, controlling, self-enhancing and trusting. An unbalanced mix results in maladjusted motives, misdirected actions with undesirable consequences. James says, "Jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom". (James 3:16) Rather, he says:-

> "wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere." (James 3:17)

Of Plans and Purposes

> "*The LORD Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen.*" Isaiah 14:24 NIV

The Scottish poet, Robert Burns is credited with coining the idiom, 'best-laid plans of mice and men oft go astray'. It appears that as Robert was ploughing a field the plough blade unintentionally destroyed the nest of a field mouse, it's intended home for the winter. Planning and purposing is part of living. Indeed, the Lord has created us with the capacity to plan and purpose even as He has plans and purposes for us. He says, "For I know the plans I have for you, . . . They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)

David was in deep, open and honest conversation with the Lord when he declared, "I am determined not to sin in what I say." (Psalm 17:3) His purpose and plan was that his conversation would be pure and honest and in harmony with the will of his Lord. In a later psalm he declared the same intent when he penned these words of commitment, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, . . . " (Psalm 19:14)

God has a plan for us. He "causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Romans 8:28) From the very beginning It has been His plan that, in responding to His invitation, we would "become like His Son" (V.29). A chosen people, with a chosen calling to Christlikeness.

> "With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."
>
> (Ephesians 1:8-10 NIV)

The Divine Intent

> "*God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.*" John 3:17

Why? Why would He bother? The intentionality and purposefulness of God's interventions on behalf of humanity are no more clearly evidenced than in these words of Jesus. "God sent his son . . . to save the world". Paul came to understand, personally appreciate and then clearly articulate the good news of God's grace. He writes, "For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:19)

The profound nature of God's intent can hardly be expressed more clearly than by the words of Paul as he goes on to explain that God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (V.21 NKJV) In an earlier letter, Paul explained how God had a mysterious contingency plan that had been put in place before the creation of this living planet - a creation that included beings made in His own image, who were endowed with reasoning capacity, the ability to know, the power of choice and the capacity to think and act independently. (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:7) This contingency plan had to deal with the real possibility that man would choose a path contrary to the plans and purposes of God. And when it did happen, God activated His plan to rescue humanity - a plan to reveal the extent of His love for a fallen world.

Just think of it, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16 NKJV)

> "This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all."
>
> (1Timothy 1:15)

Motive Enough!

"*We love Him because He first loved us.*"
1 John 4:19 NKJV

The story is told of a beautiful young slave girl who was being auctioned. The bidding was intense as lustful men vied for the prize. A gentleman passerby was taken aback by what was happening but felt compelled to bid for this beauty. He had just sold property and as the bidding soared higher, he bid all he had earned for this girl, and the bid held.

As he was completing the transaction papers, she was brought to him. In fear, defiance and anger, she lashed out at him, scratching his face. He took the document of ownership that he had just signed and handed it to her, turned and walked away. She looked down at the papers and saw the word "free" written across the document. She was free but alone in a cruel world and the only person who had shown any kindness was walking away wounded by her reaction. He who she had despised, she now desired. Running after him, she threw herself at his feet and asked that she be his slave.

God is love and the reality and extent of His love is expressed in the price that was paid for our redemption. John pointed this out emphatically when he wrote, "This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." (1John 4:10) It is the immensity of this act of love that draws us inextricably into an ever growing relationship with the Divine. This is a living relationship motivated by love. A relationship devoid of fear but full of trust, respect and commitment.

> "Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us."
> (1 John 4:11-12)

Fixing Our Focus

> "*So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.*" 2 Corinthians 5:9 RSV

It was 1893 when Ellen White wrote to her nephew, Frank Belden and his wife, Harriet. Frank was a talented musician and hymn writer but his aunt was concerned for his spiritual state. His own self-reliance and self-sufficiency were of concern to her and she wrote, "You should be able to say, "I have seen the Lord always before me, because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." You must be renewed, transformed, converted, and your whole life should be ordered and fashioned after the likeness of Christ."

Six years later, Frank wrote, "Look upon Jesus, sinless is He; Father, impute His life unto me. . . ." These words are the opening lines to what became a well known hymn of surrender and commitment.

Paul admonishes us to live our lives in such a way that we "honor and please the Lord" and that we get to know him better. (cf. Colossians 1:10) He says, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect." (Romans 12:2)

It appears that Frank had fixed his focus on Christ because he was able to write, "Longing the joy of pardon to know; Jesus holds out a robe white as snow; Lord, I accept it! leaving my own, Gladly I wear Thy pure life alone." Let us also fix our focus on the one who willingly imputes and imparts His pure life and character to us.

> "Finally, dear brothers and sisters, we urge you in the name of the Lord Jesus to live in a way that pleases God, as we have taught you. You live this way already, and we encourage you to do so even more." (1 Thessalonians 4:1)

Realigning Our Reasoning

> "*Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.*" Isaiah 1:18 NKJV

God comes to us with a proposition that He would have us consider, mull over, seek clarification on and then reason through carefully with Him. What He is proposing seems an impossibility. Sin is a stubborn stain that is resistant to every effort to remove it. It is ingrained into the warp and woof of our lives, but the Lord says emphatically, "*They shall be as white as snow*."

The Lord invites us to sit down and talk over our situation. Even though we have put every effort into cleaning up our act, He makes it clear that "No amount of soap or lye can make [us] clean" and that, He can "still see the stain of [our] guilt" (Jeremiah 2:22), He assures us that "They shall be as wool." He guarantees it - it's part of His covenant of promise implemented in and through Jesus. John says, "And you know that Jesus came to take away our sins, and there is no sin in him." (1John 3:5; cf. Romans 11:27)

Job was a man whose life had been turned upside down by disaster and disease. Four friends came to "comfort" him but he found their faulty reasoning to be worthless. They were no comfort because they new nothing more than he already new. Rather, he longed to speak directly with the Almighty, to sit down and reason with God himself (Job 13:1-3). While he trusted the wisdom and purposes of God, he sought to understand them. And when God had opened up his understanding, Job answered,

> "I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance."
>
> (Job 42:5-6)

Perfected Purpose

> "*But whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has been perfected. By this we know that we are in him.*" 1 John 2:5 NET

It was His plan, His perfect plan founded on and an expression of His divine nature, character and being. God made man in His own image, made with the capacity to act independently, to choose and, above all, to love. "Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes." (Ephesians 1:4) What does it mean to be holy and without fault?

To be holy - There are three scriptures that Peter could have quoted from when he wrote, "But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy."" (1 Peter 1:15-16; cf. Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7) We are made holy by the pure blood of Christ that cleanses us of all sin. The night before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed,"I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth. . . Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth." (John 17:19,17) It is in covenantal relationship with Christ that holiness is received. It is in being in Christ and Christ being in us that we are made holy.

Without fault - It is Christ alone who can keep us from falling and failing. It is Christ alone who can present us faultless before the Father (cf. Jude 1:24). It is by His merits and His abiding grace - He in us and we in Him - that we are counted as faultless, immersed in and perfected by His loving presence. Jesus closed His last prayer with, "so the love You have loved Me with may be in them and I may be in them." (John 17:26 HCSB)

> "No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God resides in us, and his love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:12 NET)

— Week Twenty-one —

Building Better Behaviour

"If the deceptive covering which is about us could be removed so that we could see ourselves as God sees us, we would no longer seek to justify self but would fall all broken upon Christ, the only One who can remove the defects in our characters."

(Adapted from E.G. White, Mind, Character and Personality Vol. 2, p.638)

Step 7

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

A Basis for Better Behaviour

> "*Therefore the Lord GOD said: "Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; the one who believes will be unshakable.*"" Isaiah 28:16 HCSB

The importance of a cornerstone in the foundation of a masonry building is that it becomes the point of reference for the whole structure. It was necessarily made of quality stone that had been cut and honed to precise dimensions so that when layed correctly would provide the truest possible point of reference for the whole structure.

We talk of building character or of building a carrier or a reputation. It is character building that Jesus was talking about when He to told the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27). He pointed out the importance of a firm foundation and, in the context of the story, that foundation is His teachings, teachings which emanate from the will of His father. God's laws are immutable, and intended to be the foundation for all of life's actions and purposes (V.21,23) and a life built on anything other than this sure foundation will certainly fail the test.

Jesus is the embodiment of God's will and purpose. He is that sure foundation, that precious cornerstone that was tested and tried and found to be strong enough to stand against every effort of the enemy of souls to bring Him down. He was tempted in all points as we are but remained true to His commission and calling (Hebrews 4:15).

A belief that is unshakeable is a belief founded on immutable principles, principles that are as eternal as the one who embodies them and who wrote them on tables of stone with His own finger.

> "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11)

The Better Behaviour Manual

"*How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.*" Psalm 119:9 NIV

We are probably all familiar with the series of manuals called the 'Idiot's Guide to . . . .', or the competing series '. . . For Dummies'. There are 'How to' manuals, User Manuals, Instruction Guides and the like for virtually everything we would like to do. Manufacturers have manuals for their products that we are told we should read carefully before using the product. But, of course, how many of us even bother reading the instructions.

Our text for today directs our attention to the God given guidebook for life. Within the pages of the Bible we find all that is needed to live life as it was meant to be. It is a book that focuses on the essentials of relationships and human interaction with fellow humans, the created environment and, most importantly, the creator of it all. The major theme of the Bible is love, and that part specifically written with the finger of God encapsulates the principle of love in ten carefully worded 'how to' instructions.

We learn to fix our focus on our awesome, loving God; to honor and respect Him and His holy name, and to continually remember that we owe our existence to Him. He created and owns of all things and is worthy of our worship. But He would have us also love, respect and honor our family heritage, along with the life, personhood, property and reputation of others and to be so satisfied within ourselves that there is no room for envy or consuming covetousness.

These principles were embodied in Jesus, the way, truth and life. In Him and through Him we live and move and exist.

"Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path. I've promised it once, and I'll promise it again: I will obey your righteous regulations."
(Psalm 119:105-106)

Our Master, Model and Mentor

"*Then he said to the crowd, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me.*" Luke 9:23

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? In today's scripture, Jesus prescribes three actions that are essential before one can be considered a follower of Christ - turn, take up and follow. In talking to another crowd, Jesus pointed out three other actions essential to being His follower - calculate, commit and carry (see Luke 14:26-28). Let's examine each of these in the context of His example.

Calculate - Even before creation there was a plan to pay for our redemption. Jesus said, "the Son of Man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many." "He has paid a full ransom . . . He has purchased us to be his own people". Hence He is rightfully our Master. (1 Peter 1:18-20; Mark 10:45; Psalm 119:9; Ephesians 1:14)

Commit - Our Lord and Master's passionate commitment, His consuming zeal is seen in the steps He took to bring His purchased people into a never-ending covenantal relationship with Himself. He is our model of commitment.

Turn - Our mentor turned from temptation, to a path of selfless saving service. He calls us to do as He has done.

Take up - His commission and mission was to save. He challenges us to also have a burden for saving others.

Carry - Our Master bore our iniquity to the cross, He calls us to bring this Good News to a languishing and lost world.

Follow - Jesus says, "Whoever serves me must follow me." (John 12:26 NIV) He is our Master, model and mentor.

"For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps."

(1Peter 2:21)

Surrendering Our Shortcomings

> “O people of Judah and Jerusalem, surrender your pride and power. Change your hearts before the LORD, or my anger will burn like an unquenchable fire because of all your sins.” Jeremiah 4:4

The situation in Judah and Jerusalem had become very precarious. It was a time of empire building. The mighty Assyrian empire was crumbling under the onslaughts of the rising Babylonian power. Pharaoh Necho had killed good king Josiah and Judah had become a vassal state of Egypt. Soon after this the Babylonian army defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish and marched south to consolidate Babylonian authority over all the Egyptian vassal states including Judah.

Judah and Jerusalem had lost their way. Idolatry and worldliness was rampant. Pride, position and power were the hallmark of the people. They had little concept of or concern for the message from God that Jeremiah had been asked to give them. In rejecting the Lord’s call to repentance, Judah and Jerusalem also relinquished the protection of the Lord and were taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

Surrender is not an easy thing but the Lord pleads with us to do that. He asks us to let go everything that separates us from a meaningful relationship with Him - our unhealthy habits and destructive addictions, our wily and wilful ways, our pride and pursuit of power or control. Or is it self-abrogation or self-mortification that we need to surrender. God seeks our surrender so He can set us free. It would be good if we could pray this prayer of surrender.

> "My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen." (AA Big Book p.76)

Active Listening, Actualized Living

> "And I assure you that the time is coming, indeed it's here now, when the dead will hear my voice—the voice of the Son of God. And those who listen will live." John 5:25

Jesus sends a message to the church in Sardis, the fifth of the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation, and tells them that while they may think they are alive, they are actually dead - dead spiritually, dead because of sin (Rev.3:1). But Jesus speaks and the dead hear His voice and those who listen, live.

Hearing is a sensory input pathway that has little to no value unless the hearer actually processes the sounds heard and draws meaning from them. To do this is to begin to listen. Unfortunately, the oft quoted statement - "Most people tend to be 'hard of listening' rather than 'hard of hearing'" - is true. Listening is the pathway to learning but, in this the age of learning and increased knowledge, the words of Paul ring true when he says that people will be always learning without coming to understand truth (see 2 Timothy 3:7).

Active, directed, purposeful and responsive listening is what we need to come to the knowledge and practice of truth. This comes from a willingness to listen to the master teacher, the word made flesh, He who is the way, the truth and life itself. Through this process, the living dead can be raised to real living, meaningful living, actualized and purposeful living - living in and for Christ. Paul calls this newness of life and that life is lived to the honor and glory of God.

Paul says, "Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24) and wisdom personified says:-

> "But all who listen to me will live in peace, untroubled by fear of harm." (Proverbs 1:33)

Do as I Have Done

"*For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.*" John 13:15 NKJV

The following excerpt from the devotional classic, The Desire of Ages, sets before us the significance of humble service.

"Christ would have His disciples understand that although He had washed their feet, this did not in the least detract from His dignity. "Ye call Me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am." And being so infinitely superior, He imparted grace and significance to the service. No one was so exalted as Christ, and yet He stooped to the humblest duty. That His people might not be misled by the selfishness which dwells in the natural heart, and which strengthens by self-serving, Christ Himself set the example of humility. He would not leave this great subject in man's charge. Of so much consequence did He regard it, that He Himself, One equal with God, acted as servant to His disciples. While they were contending for the highest place, He to whom every knee shall bow, He whom the angels of glory count it honor to serve, bowed down to wash the feet of those who called Him Lord. He washed the feet of His betrayer.

"In His life and lessons, Christ has given a perfect exemplification of the unselfish ministry which has its origin in God. God does not live for Himself. By creating the world, and by upholding all things, He is constantly ministering for others. "He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." Matthew 5:45. This ideal of ministry God has committed to His Son. Jesus was given to stand at the head of humanity, that by His example He might teach what it means to minister. His whole life was under a law of service. He served all, ministered to all. Thus He lived the law of God, and by His example showed how we are to obey it."

(E.G. White, Desire of Ages, p.649)

In All Things

> "*Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.*"
>
> 1 Corinthians 9:25 NASB

"In all things? Self-control in all things? Paul, what are you saying to us? Is there no room for a little self-indulgence?"

In response to our questions Paul writes, "For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things." (2 Corinthians 2:9 NASB)

There is a purpose in all of this, a purpose planned in the past that would give evidence of relational commitment to God the Father, to our teacher and master trainer, Jesus, and to our ever-present prompter, the Holy Spirit. Adam and Eve were given but one test of their self-control and commitment. We likewise have one test in the race of life - a test of self-discipline (discipleship) and loyalty. Jesus spelt out that test when He said to His disciples and He says it to us, "If you love me, obey my commandments." (John 14:15)

Discipleship demands our attention. It is disciplined in all things and at all times. Paul reminds us that "the LORD disciplines those he loves" (Hebrews 12:6), and our Lord and Master teacher reminds us that "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher." (Luke 6:40 NKJV)

Our teacher, master, model and mentor has given us an example. Let us follow Him with these words as our motto:-

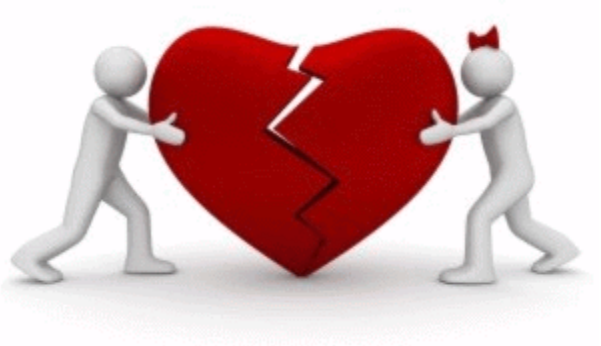
"Be like Jesus, this my song, In the home and in the throng; Be like Jesus, all day long! I would be like Jesus."

James Rowe

> "but speaking truth in love, we may grow up in all things into him, who is the head, even Christ;"
>
> (Ephesians 4:15 ASV)

— Week Twenty-two —

Repairing Relationships - 1



"To know God is, in the scriptural sense of the term, to be one with Him in heart and mind, having an experimental knowledge of Him, holding reverential communion with Him as the Redeemer. Only through sincere obedience can this communion be obtained."
(E.G. White, In Heavenly Places, p.638)

Step 8

Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

The Super Sensitive Syndrome

> "*We who are strong must be considerate of those who are sensitive about things like this. We must not just please ourselves*." Romans 15:1

Charles Wesley Naylor, a 20th century Christian author and hymn writer, wrote a series of homilies that were published under the title, Heart Talks. He broaches the subject of the super sensitive in an article entitled 'Egg-Shell Christians'. He sees inordinate self-love to the neglect of loving others as the basis of this sensitivity. He writes, "Self-love begets vanity; it quivers in keenest anguish at a sneer or a scornful smile; it is distressed by even a fancied slight."

Are we easily offended? Do we wonder what others are thinking and saying about us? Are we looking for and expecting slights, ridicule and what we presume are intentioned hurts? Do we readily question or depreciate the intent of family, friend or fellow humans? Are we always craving attention, recognition, praise and even affirmation - an ego boost to shore up our fragile self-image? If we honestly answer 'yes' to any of these questions, we are likely suffering from the super sensitive syndrome. This is a soul destroying sickness that is responsive to one specific remedy, the remedy of Christ on the cross.

Charles Naylor gives this prescription. "[T]urn your eyes away from self to Jesus Christ, and look upon him until you see how little and insignificant you and your interests really are. Look upon him until you see how high above all such narrow pettishness he was, until you see that his great heart was so overrunning with love for others that he had no time to think of himself. Then ask him to . . . fill your heart with that same love." Jesus said:-

> "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."
>
> Matthew 11:28

Brake the Bands of Bitterness

> "*Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many*." Hebrews 12:15

Bitterness is a blight that grows out of the bruises of life. It is a chronic corrosive ulcer of painful proportions, a product of festering anger, obsessive outrage, hurt pride and smoldering resentment. Bitterness prolongs the pain of perceived injustice, promotes pessimism and paranoia, and prevents the enjoyment of life in the present. "Bitterness is unforgiveness fermented." (Gregory Popcak)

Paul writes, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior." (Ephesians 4:31) But how do we get rid of it?" What is the remedy for this chronic condition?

Paul continues with an alternative mind-set to bitterness and the associated negative responses. "Instead, [he says] be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you". (V.32)

Leon F Seltzer Ph.D., writing on the Psychology Today blog, states,"Virtually every writer who has weighed in on the subject of bitterness has discussed its ultimate remedy in terms of forgiveness. For forgiveness alone enables you to let go of grievances, grudges, rancor and resentment. It's the single most potent antidote for the venomous desire for retributive justice poisoning your system . . . So learning . . . to forgive your "violator" facilitates your recovering from a wound that, while it may have originated from outside yourself, has been kept alive (and even "nurtured") from the venom you've synthesized within you."

> "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can fully share its joy." (Proverbs 14:10)

Quitting the Blame Game

"*Don't point your finger at someone else and try to pass the blame!* " Hosea 4:4

We sing, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going". The song, of course, is about the ignition of God's love in the heart and how quickly it can spread to others. But the same can be said of blame. Neil Farber M.D, Ph.D., in writing about the blame game, likens it to a fiery conflagration - a bush fire of "blames here, blames there, blames, blames everywhere." He goes on to say, "It seems that in every newspaper that I open, every journal that I read, every TV show or TV news broadcast that I watch, blaming is front and center. The focus on blaming is not the pathway to positivity. Rather, it is through ubiquitous finger-pointing that we will go down in blames."

We seem to live in a society of social arsonists who are adept at blamethrowing. We have all been trained in the same school - 'Adam's Academy of Advanced Accusations'. Or is it just a congenital malfunction of perception transmitted to us through millennia of generations? You see, it's in our very nature to investigate the cause - the 'why', the 'what', the 'who' but that is not what blaming is. Blaming is attributing the cause of an action to someone or something other than the perpetrator of the action.

Hosea calls us to quit the finger pointing blame game, the shirking of responsibility. John F. Kennedy once said, "Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future." You see, Jesus has taken the blame for our past, "because of his experience, [he] will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins." (Isaiah 53:11) But He does say, "Go and sin no more." (John 8:11) Let us quit the blame game!

"They have told no lies; they are without blame."
(Revelation 14:5)

Handling Hurt

> "*I have thought deeply about all that goes on here under the sun, where people have the power to hurt each other.*" Ecclesiastes 8:9

Solomon came to the sad conclusion that we are all capable of hurting each other and if this be so, as indeed it is, we are then just as capable of hurting or harming ourselves. Hurt comes as a consequence of abuse. Abuse, in the broadest sense, occurs when we or others act contrary to the life directive to love.

When we suffer hurt we need remember that there is one that suffers each hurt with us. The Lord, speaking through Jeremiah, says, "I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief." (Jer.8:21) He hurts when His creation is harmed. The Lord says,""Am I the one they are hurting?" . . . "Most of all, they hurt themselves, to their own shame."" (Jer.7:19) The hurt aimed at others always has an equal and opposite reaction.

The Bible is replete with God's promises of protection from hurt. The Lord says, "I will protect those who trust in my name." (Psalm 91:14) Satan used the context of this verse to tempt Jesus to jump off the Temple but the Lord reminds us not to abuse the privilege of His protection (see Luke 4:9-12). Rather, we need to let Jesus heal us. The Psalmist reminds us that "He [the Lord] heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Ps 147:3).

When we accept God's love, when it fills us and flows out from us in blessing to others, then will our hurt be healed and be replaced with an overflowing desire and willingness to "Bless those who curse [us and] pray for those who hurt [us]." (see Luke 6:28)

> "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Romans 15:13 (NKJV)

Watching Our Words

"*Take control of what I say, O LORD, and guard my lips.*" Psalm 141:3

There is that old adage, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me", that is meant to bolster our courage under the onslaught of criticism, slander, slur and insult. But as often as we may repeat it, it does not protect us from the pain of verbal abuse. And seldom do we remember it when we find ourselves dispensing generous doses of innuendo, inference and insincere flattery.

Our tongue can spark an unintended (or sometimes intended) conflagration that not only burns others but, as James puts it, "sets the whole course of one's life on fire" (James 3:6 NIV). He reminds us that "blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth", and then adds, "Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!" (V.10)

In Solomon's proverbial style he contrasts the destructive with the constructive power of words. He compares cutting words with words that heal, damaging deceit with life-lifting gentleness, and flattery with honest criticism (see Proverbs 12:18; 15:4;28:23) He summarises well with this comment, "Words from the mouth of the wise are gracious, but fools are consumed by their own lips." (Ecclesiastes 10:12 NIV)

"Don't utter, express or even think worthless or foul words." Paul says, and continues, "but rather, use well chosen, constructive words that build up, encourage and bless the hearers." (Ephesians 4:28 author's paraphrase) For this to happen we need to offer the Psalmist's prayer quoted above in the key text. "Lord, take control!" This request infers that we are willing to hand over control of our speech centre to the one who will teach us what to say.

> "The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word." (Isaiah 50:4 NASB)

Actions Speak Louder . . .

> "*Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God*."
>
> 1 John 3:18-19

Experts tell us we communicate only 7% with our words, 35% with our tone of voice and 58% with our actions. John new this intuitively and evidentially through the example of his fellow apostle, Peter.

Peter was a man of action. He was a hands on fisherman whose bold utterances sometimes backfired on him. He is remembered for his declaration the night of Jesus' betrayal, "Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will. Lord, I am ready to go to prison with you, and even to die with you." Yet, before dawn his actions were as Jesus had predicted, "you will deny three times that you even know me." (Mark 14:29-30; Luke 22:33-34)

Sometime after that bitter experience Peter went fishing with his fellow disciples. They toiled all night but without success - that is, until Jesus arrived on the scene. After the breakfast Jesus had prepared for them, He asked Peter three times, "do you love me?" Three times He instructed Peter to nurture the flock and then, irrespective of the lot of others, to remain His follower - to demonstrate his love by actions. (John 21)

Peter had a commission to preach the gospel to all the world but there remained a reticence to reach out to the gentiles. The Lord gave him a vision that clarified the issue and he was then able to demonstrate God's love for the gentile Cornelius and his household by breaking with cultural prejudices and entering into their home. This action initiated the gospel outreach to the gentile world.

> "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." (John 13:35)

Intentionally Intentional

> "*No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*" Philippians 3:13-14

It is not a random choice that Paul is talking about in these verses. It is a fixed focus, goal directed decision to press on toward the heavenly prize. This is a way of living and relating that is modelled on the intentional life of Christ who entered the human realm with one purpose to which he was fully committed - to save us, to impute and impart to us His righteousness.

This one thing - to achieve true intentionality - the purpose, the one thing - we need to learn the three lessons that every successful athlete must learn.

Forget the past - Many a contest is lost when an athlete allows past errors to impact present performance. Our coach has given us a simple race plan built on the principle of love. Let us forget the past and stick to the plan.

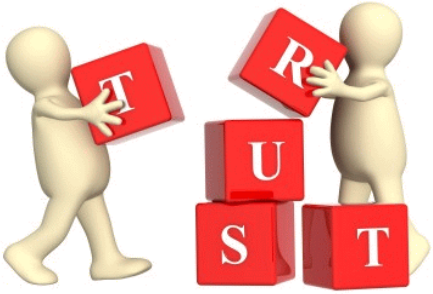
Press on in the present - Life is a marathon but the present is all that counts. It's the one step at a time, the pressing on through the pain and perplexity of the present that counts. Again, let's stick to the plan and press on.

Focus on the future - the heavenly prize, "the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge" longs to give us. But, let us never forget, "athletes cannot win the prize unless they follow the rules." (2 Timothy 4:8; 2:5)

> "Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win!" (1 Corinthians 9:24)

— Week Twenty-three —

Repairing Relationships - 2



"Christlike love blends heart with heart. The truth draws men together. It brings into harmony and unity all who have an earnest, living faith in the Saviour. Christ designs those who believe in Him to develop and become strong by association with one another. All who work unselfishly in the Master's service bear credentials to the world that God has sent His Son to this earth." (E.G. White, The Upward Look, p.104)

Step 9

Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

On Being Authentic

> " *Now he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume. Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God*."
>
> 2 Corinthians 2:14LP-15FP

Most perfumes today are synthetically produced. All natural ingredients are more expensive, some decidedly rare and others of variant quality. The authentic life is one that exudes the essence of who we are when we are impregnated with the sweet presence of Christ. It is as we imbibe the knowledge and very nature of Christ, as we "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8), that we become a "Christ-like fragrance".

Unfortunately the pure essential oil of Christ-likeness can be easily compromised by the inclusion of attributes such as flattery, political correctness and people pleasing. These can mask the authentic fragrance of a Christ-like life. The reality of this was clearly understood by king Solomon when he wrote, "As dead flies cause even a bottle of perfume to stink, so a little foolishness spoils great wisdom and honor." (Ecclesiastes 10:1)

We have in Christ a true model of authenticity. "Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God." (Ephesians 5:2) The authentic Christian life is a subtly sweet savour to those who long to be saved but is repugnant to the rebellious, indulgent spirit. Paul explains, "To those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom. But to those who are being saved, we are a life-giving perfume. And who is adequate for such a task as this?" (2 Corinthians 2:16) Let the authenticity of Christ's love be as a sweet fragrance that wafts naturally from our lives today.

> "Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other." (Romans 12:10)

Judge Not

> "*Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.*" Luke 6:37 NIV

These words of Jesus are drawn from Luke's record of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus warns us from drawing wrong conclusions from the perceptions we have of the words, attitudes, intentions and actions of others. Condemnation then follows as a consequence of judgment. Rather than judging and condemning, Jesus says, "Forgive."

This teaching is well illustrated by an experience John Wesley had. There was a man in his congregation who he considered to be miserly and covetous - unworthy of his respect. His disdain bubbled over in open criticism when this man made but a meagre contribution to a worthy charity he was promoting.

Later, the man came to Wesley privately and explained that before his conversion he had dishonestly run up extensive debts. Now he was working on paying back his creditors so he had little to spare for much other than his tithe. He had been eating parsnips and water for several weeks so that he could repay his debts and in so doing demonstrate how the grace of God can change the heart of a dishonest man.

Mortified by his wrongful judgment and open condemnation of this man, Wesley apologized and sought his forgiveness. When we really get down to examining our own reactions to others, do we not, like Wesley, find reason to regret our own critical conclusions, our hasty condemnation, our need to apologize? There is one standard that we need to understand, the standard of reciprocation. Jesus clearly stated it when He continued with these words,

> "For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged." (Matthew 7:2)

Keep It Open and Honest

"*An honest answer is like a kiss of friendship."*
Proverbs 24:26

Honesty is highly valued in a person and is the foundation on which relationships are built. It stands, with truth and integrity, above all other traits. Without honesty there can be no trust, without trust relationships fall apart. David, in his Psalm of contrition written after his dishonest dealings with Bathsheba, wrote, "But you [O God] desire honesty from the womb" (Ps.51:6) or, as other translations suggest, from the core of our being.

A young man sat in a prison cell contemplating why he was there. Was it the fact that he had swindled his employer or did it go deeper, go earlier. He thought of the time when, as a ten year old, his uncle had sent him to pay a bill at the local store and he failed to return the change to his uncle? This one act of dishonesty set in train a pattern that was responsible for his imprisonment and disgrace.

Psychotherapist, Barton Goldsmith Ph.D., in a blog on the Psychology Today website, draws this conclusion, "Honesty is a way of life, not just a behavior. . . Knowing you can totally trust one another brings a type of freedom and comfort that helps your relationship work in the best way possible." (Posted Nov. 05, 2014)

But there are barriers to honesty. Take the three 'Ds' of denial, deception and distrust. Denial is a type of blindness, an unwillingness to accept fact. Deception is covert dishonesty. Distrust is built on doubts, misgivings, suspicions and disbelief. Then there is fear - fear of failure, pain or loss. A closely related barrier is shame - the fear of being found out. To be completely open and honest, these and more need our prayerful, careful and considered attention.

"Honesty guides good people; dishonesty destroys treacherous people." (Proverbs 11:3)

Make the Time

> "*Leaving that region, they travelled through Galilee. Jesus didn't want anyone to know he was there, for he wanted to spend more time with his disciples and teach them.*" Mark 9:30-31

Meaningful relationships need time. We can be so busy doing 'things' that we neglect or even marginalise the 'others' in our life. Victor Hugo, the French author once said, "Short as life is, we make it still shorter by the careless waste of time."

Paul makes this suggestion, "be careful how you walk . . . making the most of your time" (Ephesians 5:15-16 NASB) There are times when we, like Jesus, need to purposely make time for our relationships with each other and with God. It takes time to move from a mere casual relationship to a more meaningful one. And having made the time, let's use the time meaningfully.

David was lamenting how his uncertainties had led to lost opportunities when he prayed, "LORD, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered—how fleeting my life is. . . . My entire lifetime is just a moment to you; at best, each of us is but a breath." (Psalm39:4-5) Time lost can never be regained. It is a precious commodity that can slip through the fingers of our life so imperceptibly. The now is all we have. The past is lost, never to be retrieved. The future is yet to be a fleeting moment in the present before it is lost in the past. We can plan for the future, implement in the present but only ponder the past.

Let us not waste time on regrets but rather, revel in real relationships that have meaning in the present and build bonds that will last for eternity.

> "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time." (Colossians 4:5)

Take the Time

"*And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another . . .*"

Hebrews 10:25

Life can get so busy with pressing and exhausting issues - things to be done, schedules and expectations to be met, running the rat race - that we neglect that which we so often take for granted, our personal and collective relationships. Here are some elements of relationships that we may need to give more time to:-

Take time to listen - in doing so we acknowledge the worth of others. James, the brother of Jesus, says, "My dear brothers and sisters, you must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry." (James 1:19). Listening is giving the other person our attentive presence. In so doing we show that we value them and the relationship that we share. "What a shame, what folly, to give advice before listening to the facts!" (Proverbs 18:13)

Take time to give time - Time is a precious commodity. Sharing our time with others - our family, friends or even strangers - shows that we value them.

Take time to encourage - Paul emphasized this point when he wrote to the believers in Rome and said, "When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours." (Romans 1:12) In another letter he wrote, "So encourage each other and build each other up, . . ." (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Take time to forgive - We should "Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends [us]. Remember, the Lord forgave [us] . . . " (Colossians 3:13)

Take time to love -

"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God." (1 John 4:7)

Unconditional Expectations

> "*Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.*" Philippians 2:1-2

We talk of unconditional love - love that loves anyhow, without strings and without expectations. But when we talk about unconditional expectations we are entering into the mysterious realm of probability theory. Now, for most of us that's an area we don't want to touch, the realm of mathematical conjecture that is beyond our comprehension.

It would appear that, in our text for today, Paul is expecting to be happy only when certain relational criteria are met by his converts. He has hopes and aspirations for them even as God has for us. The Lord says, "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you *a future and a hope [an expected end (KJV)]*." (Jeremiah 29:11)

Such an expectation is predicated upon the unconditional love expressed by the parties to the relationship. That is, the wholesome expectation that is founded on the expression and experience of unconditional but intentional love. There was intention in God and Christ's unconditional love for us as is expressed in these words of Jesus, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." This is our unconditional expectation when we love each other as God, through Christ, loves us.

> "That is what the Scriptures mean when they say, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him."" (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Practicing Patience

> "*We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love.*" 2 Corinthians 6:6

Patience is one of a quartet of qualities that sings harmoniously to the sweet accompaniment of the Holy Spirit. It sings a song of sincere love, love that floats from our lives to those who are listening.

The dulcet tones of purity bring out the melodious theme of a life in tune with the heavenly score. Kindness and understanding add colour, harmony and added overtones of joy and happiness. But patience is foundational and fundamental to the wholeness of our being. It patiently plots the complex pattern and progression of cords that resolve to a glorious climax of a life well lived.

Patience can lead us out of the dissonance of impure thoughts to the sweet song of sanctity. It takes the cacophony of misunderstandings, unkind thoughts and acts, and brings resolution resonating with expressions of tolerance, forbearance and restraint. The Psalmist, strikes the right cord when he says, "How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!" (Psalm 133:1)

Patience needs plenty of private practice to prepare us for those inevitable public performances. We will be called upon to stay true to the score in the face of the discordant voices of others whose lives know nothing of the disciplined life of a true performer in the heavenly choir. Under the baton of Christ, we are called to "patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind." (2 Corinthians 6:4) We are reminded that "God is pleased with [us] when [we] do what [we] know is right and patiently endure unfair treatment." (1 Peter 2:19) Why not practice patience today?

> "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony." (Colossians 3:14)

— Week Twenty-four —

Loving to Live,

Living to Love

"Human love is . . . little better than a form of selfishness. But the love of God is the absolute opposite of all these things. "God so *loved*... that He GAVE. With God loving is giving. "God is love." With the Eternal One to love is to give. "God is love." His life is nothing but love. With Him to live is to love, and to love is to give—living is loving, and loving is giving."

(E.G. White, The Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald, April 16.1901)

Step 10

Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

God is Love

> "*We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.*" 1 John 4:16

John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, gives us the most profound commentary on the loving nature of God. Within the fifteen verses surrounding our text for today (Vs. 7-21) are to be found some of the most profound statements in the whole of scripture. The essence, the substantiveness of God's being is love, and we who were created in His image were endowed with the capacity to love as he loves.

We begin to understand the boundless, infinite nature of God's love when we read statements like this, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8 NIV) John calls this real love. He says, "This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." (1 John 4:10) This is justifying love, an act of justification.

But God's love is even more than this. As our text for today says, " . . all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them." Then John adds, "And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect." (V.17) This is sanctification. This is what Jesus was referring to when He said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Ellen White writes, "True sanctification comes through the working out of the principle of love. . . . The life of him in whose heart Christ abides, will reveal practical godliness. The character will be purified, elevated, ennobled, and glorified." (The Acts of the Apostles, p.560)

God embraces us and wraps us in His loving robe of righteousness then enters in and restores us with His love.

> "But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4:8)

The Gift of Love

> "*For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life*" John 3:16

There is no more assuring statement in all of scripture that expresses so beautifully the generosity of our God. Jesus, the gift of God to this world, is the very one who introduces Himself as God's gift of love to a perishing world. Paul explains it this way, "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Romans 5:8) This is the gift of love. But this gift encompasses so much more. James says, "All generous giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or the slightest hint of change." (James 1:17 NET)

The Gift of Freedom - Paul says that "He [Christ] gave his life to purchase freedom for everyone. . . ." (1 Timothy 2:6) Accepting God's gift of love frees us from slavery to sin and the accusations of Satan.

The Gift of Grace - "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God." (Ephesians 2:8) It is through God's grace that we are the recipients of God's mercy and forgiveness.

The Gift of Salvation - "There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

The Gift of the Holy Spirit - "For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love." (Romans 5:5)

the Gift of Eternal Life - "And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." (1 John 5:11)

> "By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life." (2 Peter 1:3)

The Power of Love

> "*For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline*."
>
> 2 Timothy 1:7 NIV

There is power in love. It was passion week and Jesus was preparing His disciples for the future event He faced. He knew what was before Him and it troubled Him, but He said, "Should I pray, 'Father, save me from this hour'? But this is the very reason I came!" Then, after receiving heaven's reassurance, He said, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself." (John 12:27-32)

Oliver Cromwell had ordered the execution of a guilty soldier at the tolling of the evening curfew bell. But the bell did not toll. On investigation, they found that the soldier's fiancé had climbed into the belfry and clung to the bell's clapper to prevent it from striking. Summoned to give account for her actions, the young woman held up her bruised and bleeding hands, hands that had stayed the death knell. Touched by such a demonstration of love, Cromwell responded, "Your lover shall live because of your sacrifice. Curfew shall not ring tonight!"

We are moved by acts of self-sacrificing love. The psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck, states that "Sacrificial love has transforming power. Genuine love is volitional rather than emotional. . . . True love is not a feeling by which we are overwhelmed. It is a committed, thoughtful decision." God, through Christ, demonstrated true love for us in that, although we were undeserving sinners, He purposely took the path to Calvary, took our stripes, paid the price for our redemption and gave us the assurance of eternal life. That is powerful.

> "Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."
>
> (1 Corinthians 13:7)

Living Like Him

"*Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.*"
Colossians 3:10

Jesus is our role model. John says, "Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did." (1 John 2:6) It is in contemplating His life that we learn to live like Him. Let us take time to contemplate each of the following pointers to such a life.

Living Like Him in Love - "And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect . . because we live like Jesus here in this world." (1 John 4:17) Jesus reminds us, "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love." (John 15:9)

Living Like Him in Obedience - Jesus says, "When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. . . . This is my command: Love each other. " (John 15:10,17) Taking Peter's advice, "[we] must live as God's obedient children." (1 Peter 1:14)

Living Like Him in Sacrifice - "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." (Romans 12:1) It was not only on the cross that Christ sacrificed for us. His whole life was a life of humble sacrifice - a life we are asked to emulate (Read Philippians 2:1-8).

Living Like Him to God's Glory - Paul says, "Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil . . . use [it] as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God." (Romans 6:13)

"Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is." (1 John 3:2)

Loving Like Him

> "*But we don't need to write to you about the importance of loving each other, for God himself has taught you to love one another.*" 1 Thessalonians 4:9

Ted was an unattractive, disappointing, low achiever and Miss Thompson, had had little time for this 5th grader. It was coming up to Christmas and the children brought gifts for their teacher. Ted's was a rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume. She put the bracelet on and splashed some perfume on her wrist for the children to smell. This act meant much to Ted. He had lost his mother two years earlier and things had not been good at home for years. At the end of the day, Ted came up to Miss Thompson and said, "I'm glad you liked my gift, you smell just like my mother".

Miss Thompson realized that she hadn't given Ted the loving attention he had needed and prayed for a change of attitude. Her determination to love her students, particularly the slow ones, paid off. Ted's grades improved over the years until, in University, he topped the class. Four years later Miss Thompson received a note from Ted. He had graduated as an M.D. and was about to get married, but he had one request. He wrote, "I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year." She gladly sat in that seat.

John the beloved tells us how Jesus loved His disciples and loved them to the very end. He showed the extent of this love by taking the role of a lowly servant and washing His disciples feet. Then He said, "I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." (John 13:15) It is in loving service that we come to love like Him.

> "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

Boundless Love

"*No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" Romans 8:39

"Could we with ink the ocean fill,
and were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade:
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky."

These words, inscribed on the wall of a mental institution by an inmate, were added to by the hymn writer, F.M.Lehman to create the well-known twentieth century hymn, 'The Love of God'. Researchers have traced the origin of the verse to an eleventh century poem written by Jewish poet, Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai, who, in turn, may have drawn his inspiration from Sura 31 of the Qur'an, which begins with the words, "If all the trees on earth were pens, and the ocean were ink, . . .", or possibly from John, the beloved disciple of Christ who ended his Gospel with these words, "Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (John 21:25 ESV)

God's love cannot be measured by time or space. It is everlasting (see Jeremiah 31:3), it is boundless, it is limitless, it is endlessly enduring and, when we open the gates of resistance, it flows in filling the void of our lives with the comforting presence of Divine peace.

"How precious is your unfailing love, O God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your wings." (Psalm 36:7)

Boundless Living

> "*For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. . . . But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.*" Philippians 1:21,24

That word 'boundless' conjures up ideas of freedom from restrictions or barriers, without limit, immeasurable and even infinite. So we wonder what the Psalmist means when says, "Even perfection has its limits, but your commands have no limit." (Psalm 119:96) The NIV translation renders the last phrase as, "your commands are boundless". Law applies to all things for without natural law there is no existence.

But what can we make of Paul when he recommends to us a life that is lawless or should we say boundless in its nature. Paul describes a series of nine life practices that no law can restrict, in fact he says that "There is no law against these things!" So we can safely conclude that to freely indulge in these practices without limit is to experience boundless living. And this is exactly what the Lord offers us when He says, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." (John 10:10 NKJV) But such a life needs an endless supply of energy, energy that is sourced from the Holy Spirit who is ready to fill us with power from heaven (see Luke 24:49; Romans 1:20).

But what are these nine life practices that we can indulge without limit? We find them in Galatians 5:22,23.

Love - Love God, love each other, love our enemies.
Joy - In the gospel of God's grace and forgiveness.
Peace - Search for it, accept it and then maintain it.
Patience - With everyone, enduring as Jesus did.
Kindness - Indulge God's gift then give the gift.
Goodness - Taste God's goodness, show it, share it.
Faithfulness - Be reliable, responsible, dependable.
Gentleness - The unfading beauty of a quiet spirit.
Self-control - Our defence against the evil one.

— Week Twenty-five —

One With Him

"Christ in the heart, Christ in the life, this is our safety. The atmosphere of His presence will fill the soul with abhorrence of all that is evil. Our spirit may be so identified with His that in thought and aim we shall be one with Him." (E.G. White, Help in Daily Living, p.58)

Step 11

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

One With Him in Thought

> "*May all my thoughts be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.*" Psalm 104:34

A student once said to the famous French mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian philosopher, Blaise Pascal, "If I had your brains, I would be a better person." Pascal replied, "Be a better person and you will have my brains." When we consider being one with Christ in thought we are drawn to remember the words of Paul who challenges us with this proposition, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5 NKJV). This is a call to emulate the focussed, but humble thinking of our Lord. He stepped down from the glory of heaven to banish any notion of pride. He took the role of a humble servant, a role He asks, indeed expects, us to fill, and ultimately gave His all for humanity.

"One final thing," Paul concludes, "Fix your thoughts on what is **true**, and **honorable**, and **right**, and **pure**, and **lovely**, and **admirable**. Think about things that are **excellent** and **worthy of praise**." (Philippians 4:8) Here he outlines eight guides to good thinking.

Transforming truth - as found in Jesus and His word.
Honorable - thoughts of harmonious and united living.
Right - thinking based on principles of love and justice.
Pure - thoughts that respect the personhood of others.
Lovely - an appreciation of creation and creativity.
Admirable - thinking of and learning from the faithful.
Excellent - match the standard of the divine nature.
Worthy of praise - thoughts of God, "the only one who is worthy of [our] praise." Deuteronomy 10:21)

> "For, "Who can know the LORD's thoughts? Who knows enough to teach him?" But we understand these things, for we have the mind of Christ."
> (1 Corinthians 2:16)

One With Him in Purpose

> "*I cry out to God Most High, to God who will fulfill his purpose for me.*" Psalm 57:2

Yesterday we noted Pauls proposition, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5 NKJV). The Amplified Bible renders it this way, "Let this same attitude and purpose and [humble] mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus". Christ clearly enunciated His purpose when He responded to Pilot's questioning. He replied, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." (John 18:37 ESV) He who is truth bore witness to the truth of His divine authority to save sinners, "to seek and save those who are lost." (Luke 19:10) This was His purpose, a purpose attested to by the law of Moses and the writings of the prophets (see Matthew 5:17).

Now that we have this picture of Christ's purpose, let us consider our purpose. "For we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News," Paul writes, "Our purpose is to please God, not people." (1 Thessalonians 2:4) We are likewise commissioned to communicate the good news of God's love and grace. This is our purpose to fulfill - our part in the purposes of heaven.

It is as we learn to live in harmony and undivided unity within the body of His followers that we fulfill His will - when oneness of mind and purpose is demonstrated as a way of life. It was Christ's prayer and purpose to bring His followers into a unified relationship with each other, with Himself and with God.

> "Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose." Philippians 2:2

One With Him in Action

> "*And I am praying that you will put into action the generosity that comes from your faith as you understand and experience all the good things we have in Christ.*" Philemon 1:6

One day around the turn of the seventeenth century, August H. Franke, a German clergyman and founder of an orphanage and school for homeless children in Halle, answered a knock at his door. A destitute widow begged him for a gold coin. What could he do? He desperately needed funds for the orphanage himself. So, when he regretfully told her he couldn't help, she began weeping. Moved by the situation, Franke told her to wait while he went to pray. The Holy Spirit prompted him to change his mind and he gave her the money.

Two days later he received a letter of thanks from the widow. She had asked the Lord to shower the orphanage with gifts. That same day Franke received 14 gold coins. Thinking this was ample reward for his sacrificial giving, he was overwhelmed when he received word that the orphanage was soon to receive 500 gold pieces from the estate of a German Prince.

When Jesus sent His twelve disciples out on their first missionary journey He said, ""Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give." (Matthew 10:8 NKJV) This is what He would have us do. Then He says, "But I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve." (Jeremiah 17:10) Truly, real living is all about being one with Him in thought, purpose and action.

> "They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do." (2 Corinthians 8:5)

One With Him in Suffering

> "*Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world.* " 1 Peter 4:13

Charles Spurgeon, the "Prince of Preachers", is quoted as saying, "The Lord gets his best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction." Spurgeon had a plaque on the wall of his bedroom that read, "I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction." (Isaiah 48:10). He wrote, "We are chosen, not in the palace, but in the furnace. In the furnace, beauty is marred, fashion is destroyed, strength is melted, glory is consumed; yet here eternal love reveals its secrets, and declares its choice."

Victor and Mildred Goertzel wanted to understand what it was that made some people famous and exceptionally gifted. They studied four hundred and thirteen such people and found that ninety-five percent of them had overcome very difficult obstacles to attain the reputation they enjoyed.

Peter reminds us that "God called [us] to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for [us]. He is [our] example, and [we] must follow in his steps." (1 Peter 2:21*) Even as Jesus, the Son of God, "learned obedience from the things he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8) He suffered the wiles of the tempter, the insults of men, the mental anguish of Gethsemane and the physical pain of Calvary because He loved the world. Peter reminds us, "don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering." (1 Peter 4:12-13)

> "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."
> (Hebrews 2:18 NIV)

* rendered in the first person

One With Him - Our Safety

> "*He is my loving ally and my fortress, my tower of safety, my rescuer. He is my shield, and I take refuge in him.*" Psalm 144:2

The first and last two lines of the well known eighteenth century hymn, Rock of Ages, convey a profound message that we can easily miss the significance of in the singing. They read:-

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;"

Let us take each phrase of Augustus Toplady's Hymn and ponder the fuller meaning they have for us.

Rock of Ages - throughout the Bible, writers have used the imagery of solid rock to define the certainty, strength and power of God. David, for example, sang, "Who but our God is a solid rock?" (2 Samuel 22:32) It is in drinking 'The Word' as embodied in the teachings of Jesus, our saving rock, that we find solid rock certainty.

Cleft for me - Like the cleft in the rock that sheltered and protected Moses from the glory of God on mount Sinai, we will find safety when we are not only on but surrounded by the rock. Jesus prayed for His followers, "that they will all be one, just as you and I are one . . . And may they be in us". (John 17:21)

Let me hide myself - David prayed to the Lord, "Be my rock of safety where I can always hide." And, "I look to you for protection. I will hide beneath the shadow of your wings until the danger passes by." (Psalms 71:3 and 57:1)

In Thee - "When my heart is overwhelmed; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For You have been a shelter for me, . . I will trust in the shelter of Your wings." Ps. 61:2-4)

> "This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him." (Psalm 91:2)

One With Him in Gladness

> "But may all who search for you be filled with joy and gladness in you. May those who love your salvation repeatedly shout, "God is great!"" Psalm 70:4

This verse is, but for two words in the Hebrew, word for word identical with Psalm 40:16 In this verse *'elohiym* (God) is replaced with *Yĕhovah* (The Lord). The other word differs only by one letter (*yĕshuw`ah* / *tĕshuw`ah* - your salvation) which makes virtually no difference to the meaning in translation. It is interesting to note that the names *Joshua* and *Yeshua* (that is 'Jesus') are derived from the word *yĕshuw`ah*.

With this understanding and the assurances of yesterday's reading, we can then take this verse and find a deeper meaning and a profound message as we amplify and personalize it.

> But may *we* who search for you, *O Lord*, be filled with joy and gladness in you (our Rock of Salvation). May *we* who love your salvation *as found in Jesus,* repeatedly *and gladly* shout *for joy*, "*The Lord our* God is great!"

Even when life gets tough and troubles oppress us, we can rejoice because we are one with Him. The last of Jesus Beatitudes talks of such a situation. As a follower of Christ, we may suffer from verbal abuse or slander, ridicule, harassment or persecution, but Jesus says, "Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven." (Matthew 5:11-12) We do well to remember that our Lord and Saviour, "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:2) so that we may be one with Him in gladness.

> "The godly will rejoice in the LORD and find shelter in him. And those who do what is right will praise him." (Psalm 64:10)

One With Him in Glory

"*And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory.*" Romans 8:30

In our text for today we learn that there is a step by step process whereby we attain oneness with Him in Glory.

We have been chosen - "We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people." (1 Thessalonians 1:4) As God's chosen people, we are willingly obedient followers of the Good Shepherd.

We have been called - "I have called you back from the ends of the earth, saying, 'You are my servant.' For I have chosen you and will not throw you away." (Isaiah 41:9) But Jesus calls us into a more intimate relationship. He said to His disciples, "I no longer call you servants, . . . Instead, I have called you friends" (John 15:15)

We are restored to right relationship with Him - Speaking of Jesus, John writes, "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God."(John 1:12) In another place he says, "See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1)

We share in His glory - Paul says, "He [Jesus] called you to salvation when we told you the Good News; now you can share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." "And this is the secret: Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory." (2 Thessalonians 2:14; Colossians 1:27)

"And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory."
(Colossians 3:4)

— Week Twenty-six —

Sharing Hope and Healing

"He passed no human being by as worthless, but sought to apply the healing remedy to every soul. In whatever company He found Himself, He presented a lesson appropriate to the time and the circumstances. Every neglect or insult shown by men to their fellow men only made Him more conscious of their need of His divine-human sympathy. He sought to inspire with hope the roughest and most unpromising, setting before them the assurance that they might become blameless and harmless, attaining such a character as would make them the children of God." (E.G. White, Counsels for the Church, p.289)

Step 12

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others with like problems and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Recipients of Hope

"*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope, comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say.*" 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

Our text for today speaks of two tremendous gifts of grace that come to us from God the Father and His son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. The first gift is eternal comfort. Paul declares that God is the source of all comfort through Jesus and that, as recipients, we become channels of comfort to others (see 2 Corinthians 1:3-7). There is nothing so comforting as the assurance of forgiveness and the restoration of relationship. God says, "Comfort my people, . . . Speak tenderly to [them] . . . Tell [them] that . . . [there] sins are pardoned." (Isaiah 40:1-2)

"Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. "With His stripes we are healed."" (E.G. White, The Desire of Ages, p. 25)

The second gift is only a reality when we accept the first gift. The gift of 'wonderful hope' is founded on the eternal comfort and assurance we find in Jesus Christ. As Paul says, "we look forward with hope to that wonderful day when the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, will be revealed." (Titus 2:13) Jesus said, "When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am." (John 14:3) The songwriter, Wayne Hooper penned these words, words that are ours as recipients of Hope.

"We have this hope that burns within our hearts,
Hope in the coming of the Lord."

Ready to Share Our Hope

> "*Now, who will want to harm you if you are eager to do good? . . . And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it.*"
>
> 1 Peter 3:13,15

If we are experiencing the life changing, life enriching experience of a growing relationship with our redeemer, we cannot help but share the good news of our experience with others. For some who have known us, the evident change in our lives speaks volumes. For others, the evidence is in the message of hope that flows from a life lived in unconditional service to others. This is the reality, the purpose and mission of one whose life is infused with the life of Christ.

Carl was an unassuming eighty-seven year old widower who had taken on the care of the garden behind his minister's residence in what had become an increasingly violent neighbourhood. One day, as he was watering the garden, he was approached by three gang members. He offered them a drink, but as one took the hose, the others set upon him, took his watch and wallet, then fled. " I hope they'll wise up someday," he muttered as the minister came to help. A few weeks later they returned. Carl offered them a drink again. This time they took the hose and turned it on him and left him drenched and humiliated. Carl said nothing. It happened again, but this time the gang leader was alone. He came to return the stolen watch and wallet saying, "I learned something from you, you kept showing love against our hate. Thanks for straightening me out.

Carl died later that winter. Fliers reading,"Person needed to care for Carl's garden" were circulated. A young man responded, "I believe this is my job, if you'll have me."

> "Live wisely . . . Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone." (Colossians 4:5-6)

Sharing The Blessed Hope

"*But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. . . Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.*"

Jeremiah 17:7-8

Jeremiah, thank you for sharing this illustration from the Lord. It's the second of a contrasting couplet where the first describes the barrenness of a life without God. But here is portrayed a pleasing picture of perspective, power and purposeful productivity for those who have chosen to trust in the Lord. Let's grasp lessons from this picture of fruitfulness.

Perspective - There is something beautiful about the riverside. Things are greener, plants are healthier. When we are planted beside the "the LORD, the fountain of living water" (V.13), we are in a position to draw from the river of life that flows from the very throne of God and the Lamb. This perspective is primary to productivity.

Power - A tree draws its strength through its roots and leaves. When we sink the roots of faith deep into the soil of God's word and draw from the water of life, we are then able to produce leaves of faith that reach out to receive Holy Spirit power from the Sun of Righteousness. These elements provide power for productivity.

Purposeful productivity - If we only focus on sustaining the tree but fail to produce fruit we are purposeless. Let us produce fruit filled with the sweetness of God's love, the juice of joy, the fragrance of sacrificial service and seeds of peace and life giving kindness. Let us share this full bodied fruit with the spiritually malnourished around us who consume the empty 'junk food' of a worldly life.

"The seeds of good deeds become a tree of life; a wise person wins friends." (Proverbs 11:30)

Hope and Healing for the Hopeless

> "*O LORD, if you heal me, I will be truly healed; if you save me, I will be truly saved. My praises are for you alone!*" Jeremiah 17:14

Johnny wasn't doing well. He was badly burned and the pain was unbearable. In his childish mind he thought he would surely die. On hearing of his hospitalization, his local school assigned a teacher (let's call her Sally) to implement a program to help him keep up with his school work while in hospital. His regular teacher told Sally that they were working on nouns and verbs in his class and would appreciate her helping him in this area.

On her first visit, Sally was taken aback by the seriousness of Johnny's condition and the pain he was suffering. She could only stammer out, "I've come to help you with nouns and verbs." Musing on her first visit, Sally felt she hadn't accomplished much at all.

On her next visit a nurse asked Sally, "What did you do to that boy?" Sally, thinking she must have done something wrong, began to apologize. "No, no," the nurse said, "We've been worried about Johnny, but ever since your visit, his whole attitude has changed. It's as though he's decided to live."

Johnny had given up any hope of getting better until the teacher's visit, but that visit gave him hope. He put it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and verbs with a dying boy, would they?"

The realization that the Great Teacher gladly came to help us with our 'nouns and verbs' - our words and actions and so much more - assures us that there is hope for the hopeless.

> "Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance." (1 Corinthians 13:7)

The Great Physician

> "*But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture.*" Malachi 4:2

The crowd thronged around the healer as He walked with Jairus toward his home to attend his sick daughter. A chronically ill woman worked her way through the crowd until she was just behind Jesus because "she thought, "If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed." (Matthew (9:21) Reaching out, she touched the tasselled fringe of his mantle. Immediately she felt healing flow through her and immediately Jesus said, "who touched me." (Luke 8:45) Could it be that this woman new of this prophecy in Malachi and saw its fulfillment in Jesus.

Jewish men followed the instructions given by God, through Moses, to place tassels with a blue thread in them on the four corners of their cloaks. These were to remind them of the Lord's commands as symbolized by the blue thread. The Sun of Righteousness spreads out His healing wings, the robe of His righteousness to encompass all who would find protection and freedom from guilt and shame within the borders and bounds of His law of love.

The Great Physician, Jesus, was in His home town synagogue one Sabbath when he was asked to read from the book of Isaiah. He chose to proclaim His mission by reading, "He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed". This is now our role and commission as recipients of His healing touch, the gift of His grace and the mantle of His righteousness.

> "I am overwhelmed with joy in the LORD my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness." (Isaiah 61:10)

The Healing Touch

"*Then He touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith let it be to you."* " Matthew 9:29 NKJV

Jesus was a person who touched people. Touch is essential to healthy life. The essentiality of touch has been repeatedly confirmed in the way orphaned babies fail to thrive without nurturing, caring touch. But touch can be more than the hands on kind as meaningful as that can be. A healing touch may come in the form of a word spoken, a verse written, a note played or a message conveyed.

A woman lay trapped beneath a street car in Stockholm. The gathering crowd tried to move the streetcar but it was too heavy. A young man stepped forward and crawled under the street car beside her, took her hand and said, "hold my hand tightly until help comes." After her rescue she said, "I never knew the touch of a hand could mean so much." There is comfort and healing in the physical presence of one who cares.

But sometimes we cannot be physically present. Fifteen year old Douglas had leukemia and the devastating news drove him into deep depression. His aunt arranged for flowers to be delivered to him. In placing the order she mentioned that he had leukemia. When they arrived, Douglas found two cards, one from his aunt and one from the clerk at the florists which read, " I had leukemia when I was seven years old. I'm 22 years old now. Good Luck. My heart goes out to you." These words gave him hope and the will to persevere through months of treatment.

Even as Jesus expressed His care and compassion through physical as well as verbal touch, we are encouraged to do likewise. This is the message of the parable of the Good Samaritan which ends with this admonition,

"Yes, now go and do the same." (Luke 10:37)

Miracles of Grace

> "*But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."*
>
> 2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV

Pete was a carpenter and a Christian. One night he heard a suspicious noise outside, so he went out to investigate. He came face to face with a teenage intruder stealing tools from his shed. It was his neighbor's son, Ernie. The boy froze, fear flashed through his eyes. "Ernie," Pete said, "you don't have to break in if you need to use the tools." Then he took his key ring from his pocket, removed the shed key and gave it to the lad, adding, "If you need to use the tools, use the key."

Ernie took the key and quietly left. He never again broke into the shed and he never used the key. He put the key on a string, hung it on his mirror as a reminder of the grace Pete had extended to him as a youth, grace that changed the direction of his life.

We are, like Ernie, recipients of God's abundant grace. The Lord, has given us the key of knowledge. This key gives us access to all the character building tools of heaven. But let us not deny others access to those blessings of grace by keeping the keys to ourselves. Let us, by the miracle of grace that we have received, be ready and eager to use this key of knowledge to open the door of hope to others so that the rays of healing light from the "Sun of Righteousness" can flow out, through us, in transforming power to the hurting of the world.

> "For the LORD God is our sun and our shield. He gives us grace and glory. The LORD will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right."
>
> (Psalm 84:11)

He Giveth More Grace

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

Fear not that thy need shall exceed His provision,
Our God ever yearns His resources to share;
Lean hard on the arm everlasting, availing;
The Father both thee and thy load will upbear.

His love has no limit; His grace has no measure.
His pow'r has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!

Annie Johnson Flint

— Week Twenty-Seven —

Know Yourself
- Part 1 -

"Whatever your anxieties and trials, spread out your case before the Lord. Your spirit will be braced for endurance. The way will be opened for you to disentangle yourself from embarrassment and difficulty. The weaker and more helpless you know yourself to be, the stronger will you become in His strength. The heavier your burdens, the more blessed the rest in casting them upon the Burden Bearer." (Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, p.329)

Step 1

We admitted we were powerless over our hurts, habits, addictions and compulsive behaviours, that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 4

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves.

Who Am I?

"*Then King David went in and sat before the LORD and prayed, "Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?*"
1 chronicles 17:16

David had wanted to build a permanent structure to replace the tent of the tabernacle, the worship focus of the children of Israel. It had been established under Divine instruction at the foot of Mt Sinai more than five hundred years earlier. David had discussed the proposal with Nathan, the prophet who had thought it a good idea until the Lord gave him a message to give to David. The message was, "You are not the one to build a house for me to live in." (V.4) That task was to be given to his son Solomon, the first of "a dynasty of kings" (V.10).

David's response was to enter the Tabernacle, and pray a prayer of gratitude. He who had been a shepherd of sheep acknowledged the purposeful leading of the Divine Shepherd, and prayed, "Who am I . . ?" David was a man who had known success and failure, who could charm and conquer, who experienced fame as well as shame, who felt the power of fear but was comforted by the presence and leading of the Lord and could say, "You know what your servant is really like." (V.18)

In knowing and walking with our Divine Shepherd, Jesus, we get to know who we really are. We are members of a heavenly dynasty who have been redeemed by the blood of our Saviour-Shepherd to be "a Kingdom of priests for our God" (Revelation 5:10 also 1:6) We, like David, are ready to acknowledge our failings and seek cleansing and transformation. We will "let God transform [us] into a new person by changing the way [we] think." (Romans 12:2 rendered in the 1st person)

"Let all that I am wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him." Psalm 62:5

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

> "*You did not reflect on your actions or think about their consequences.*" Isaiah 47:7LP

We cannot come face to face with who we are without a mirror. While we can see much of our body directly, we need at least one mirror to see our face and at least two to see our back. We need mirrors to get a more complete picture of what we look like on the outside. But to look on the deeper aspects of our being, our thoughts, desires, motives and intentions, we need different types of "mirrors".

James, Jesus brother, likens God's perfect law to a mirror that reveals our state and shows us how to get our lives back into order. (James 1:22-25) He says, "But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it." (V.25)

In addition to God's clear directives, there is another valuable mirror that can add perspective to our lives. This mirror does not stand alone but must be viewed carefully through the primary mirror - the perfect law of liberty. Isaiah speaks of this other mirror as an adjunct to the law that helps us see things more clearly. He says, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (Isaiah 8:20 NKJV) The second mirror is found in the testimony of the patriarchs and prophets as recorded in scripture for "These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age." (1 Corinthians 10:11)

These 'mirrors' help us to think before we act, to see issues from different perspectives and to carefully evaluate the consequences.

> "Bind up the testimony, Seal the law among my disciples." (Isaiah 8:16 NKJV)

As Others See Me

> "*One day Jesus left the crowds to pray alone. Only his disciples were with him, and he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"* " (Luke 9:18)

Robert Burns, the famous 18th century Scottish poet, was sitting in church behind a fashionably dressed, upper class woman, when he spied a louse crawling on her bonnet. This prompted a poem entitled "To a Louse", in the last verse of which are the oft quoted lines:-

"O would some Power with vision teach us
To see ourselves as others see us!"

Motivational youth speaker, Justin Young, puts it this way, ""A beautiful person is not defined by a hair style, a pair of shoes, . . . Instead, beauty lies in who you are when no one is watching, the person you are when there's nothing to hide behind. No amount of concealer can cover up a cantankerous heart, but all the make-up in the world can't add a single lumen to the brightness of a beautiful soul."

When Jesus had some time to be alone with His disciples, He asked them for some public opinion feedback. After the disciples had expressed some of the views held by the crowds that had flocked to hear Jesus, He then asked them, "But who do you say I am?" How others see us is important to us. It's not so much the opinion of the jostling crowd, but more importantly the opinion of our peers and our 'dears', those close to us, those who we call friend and family.

Peter and John had been arrested after healing a cripple. They were arraigned before the council, and after hearing their answers, the members of the council were amazed and noted that they had been with Jesus. (See Acts4:13)

> "Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is." (1 John 3:2)

As God Sees Me

> "*Thereafter, Hagar used another name to refer to the LORD, who had spoken to her. She said, "You are the God who sees me." She also said, "Have I truly seen the One who sees me?"* " Genesis 16:13

God had promised Abram an offspring but Sarai, Abram's wife, was childless. Sarai came up with a plan to have a child through a surrogate arrangement. She had this Egyptian handmaid named Hagar who she offered to her husband to be another wife. Big mistake! Hagar became pregnant and relations between the two ladies disintegrated into jealousy on the one hand and contempt on the other.

"This is all your fault", Sarai said to Abram. And when he said, "you deal with it", Sarai gave Hagar such a hard time that she ran away. But The Angel of the Lord found her, reassured her, promised her a posterity through her son, Ishmael, and encouraged her to return to her mistress. It is after this encounter that she gives the LORD (Yĕhovah) a new name descriptive of her experience. The new name is *'el roi* - **the God who sees me**. This name implies so much more - 'el roi not only sees but also hears, knows, understands and reaches out to help us through the temptations and trials of life.

This was the same LORD who, some two thousand years later, experienced life as we know it - who understands our weaknesses and personally purposefully stepped into this world to be one with us. He became one with us so that He could bear our griefs and die on the cross to redeem us and gives us an eternal posterity as we respond to His boundless love, assurance and grace. He sees us, searches and finds us and offers us hope, hope that is eternal.

> "But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, . . . For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."" (1 Samuel 16:7 ESV)

Facets of Failure

"*Finally, the king's chief cup-bearer spoke up. "Today I have been reminded of my failure," he told Pharaoh.*"
Genesis 41:9

Pharaoh had a dream and none of his wise men could decipher its meaning. It was at this point that the chief cup-bearer remembered that he had forgotten something. He too had had a dream some two years earlier while imprisoned for a minor misdemeanor. His dream had been interpreted by Joseph to whom he had promised to speak up for on his reinstatement, but he had not. In hindsight we can see that this failure resulted in recall at the right time with the release and elevation of Joseph to a position of greatness. Such would not have been the case if the cup-bearer had not failed to remember his promise.

Failure is not always bad. Much has to do with what we do with it. Thomas Edison's teachers said he was too stupid to learn anything. Here was a man who lived with failure but was able to say, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." And, because of his persistence, we have, among other things, the advantage of electric lights today. Edison makes this pertinent observation, "Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."

Failure isn't a good feeling, but how we handle it can differ. Some respond negatively, resulting in disappointment, self-doubt, frustration and anger. Others are discouraged but resolve not to make the same mistake. Still others are more positive. They learn and grow from the their experiences of failure, setbacks and adversity. The words of Chuck Fulmore's gospel song are worth remembering:-

Never give up, Jesus is coming.
It's the darkest just before dawn.
Never give up, Jesus is coming.
Never give up, keep holding on!

The Dimensions of Desire

> "*May he give us the desire to do his will in everything and to obey all the commands, decrees, and regulations that he gave our ancestors.*" 1 Kings 8:58

It was during the dedication of the Temple that these words were spoken by Solomon. At the beginning of his reign the Lord had appeared to him in a dream and offered to give him whatever he wanted but all that Solomon asked for was wisdom to rule wisely. He could have asked for long life or wealth or fame. Now he asks one thing more, that God would give him "the desire to do His will in everything and to obey . . ".

Toward the end of his life Solomon mused about all he had accomplished, his wealth, prestige, power and possessions. He said, "I had everything a man could desire!" (Ecclesiastes 2:8) As he looked on all this he said, "it was all so meaningless". But, in the end, he sums up and concludes his musings with these simple but sage words of advice, "Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone's duty."

While this is very true, there is a dimension that exceeds our duty to respect and obey God and brings greater meaning to our relationship with Him. This dimension is the dimension of desire. Duty without desire is dead. Desire has the power to bring meaning to duty, it brings passion to performance, it breathes life into what otherwise would be drudgery or, indeed, servitude.

Isaiah expressed this thought so succinctly with these words, "LORD, we show our trust in you by obeying your laws; our heart's desire is to glorify your name." (Isaiah 26:8) Rightly directed desire builds bonds for eternity.

> "And I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good for them. I will put a desire in their hearts to worship me, and they will never leave me." (Jeremiah 32:40)

The Prerogative of Powerlessness

> "*Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it.*" "
>
> Mark 8:34-35

The first step in a twelve step recovery program is to admit that we are powerless. When Jesus instructs the crowd about what it means to be His disciple, He says that self must be sacrificed, indeed crucified. We are to accept a position of powerlessness. Such a picture seems abhorrent, but let's look at another picture.

Ezekiel had a vision of a valley full of dry bones that represented the hopeless and powerless state of the exiled Jews. Then the Lord asked him a question, "Can these bones become living people again?" It would be presumptuous for Ezekiel to say 'Yes', and it would be an expression of doubt and unbelief for him to say 'No'. Instead, He took the faith and trust option, the submissive, powerless option and said, "O Lord GOD, You know." (Ezekiel 37:3)

In His humanity, Christ took the path of powerlessness. This path passed through Gethsemane where twice He prayed, "I want your will to be done, not mine." He who knew the privilege of power took the prerogative of powerlessness and carried the cross to His death on calvary. And it is this path that we are called to traverse. This is our prerogative, our privilege because of the cross, and as we face the Gethsemane-like experiences of life, we can pray as He has taught us to pray, "Your will be done . . ." (Matthew 6:10)

> "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes . . ." (Romans 1:16 NIV)

— Week Twenty-Eight —

Know Yourself
- Part 2 -

"Confession Must Be Specific—True confession is always of a specific character, and acknowledges particular sins. They may be of such a nature as only to be brought before God, they may be wrongs that should be confessed before individuals who have suffered injury through them, or they may be of a general kind that should be made known in the congregation of the people. But all confession should be definite and to the point, acknowledging the very sins of which you are guilty."

(Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church Vol.5, p.639)

Step 1

We admitted we were powerless over our hurts, habits, addictions and compulsive behaviours, that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 5

Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

The Meaning of Being

> "*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, . . . Your eyes saw my unformed substance; . . . when as yet there was none of them.*" Psalm 139:14-16 ESV

When Hamlet utters the now famous Shakespearian words, "To be or not to be: that is the question", he is reflecting on the value of existence, the question of beingness. As we mull over the meaning of our beingness, we will find that the five 'W' questions - 'Who', 'What', 'Where', 'When' and 'Why' - provide a matrix of meaning that gives structure to our being.

When - our beingness is set in a point of history. Christ came at a set time to declare his righteousness and to save sinners through His sacrifice. At this point of time, like Esther, we are here for a purpose, "for such a time as this". (Romans 3:26; Esther 4:14 KJV)

Where - our place in space. Esther was reminded that she was in the palace of king Ahasuerus for a purpose. There is a place and purpose for each of us.

What - the nature of our being. It was not only Esther's physical beauty that made her attractive to others. Her demeanor and decorum won the approval of all. Like Esther, we do have input into the nature of our being.

Why - the purpose of being. Esther was to be a witness for the saving of a nation. Christ has called us to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Who - our true identity. "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12)

> "All glory to him who alone is God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord. All glory, majesty, power, and authority are his before all time, and in the present, and beyond all time! Amen." (Jude 1:25)

Pondering Our Purpose

> "But get up and stand on your feet. For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and a witness of what you have seen and of what I will reveal to you." Acts 26:16 HCSB

The dramatic encounter with Christ that Paul (Saul) had experienced on the road to Damascus became the focal point of his witness. He now stood before King Herod Agrippa II and his sister, Berenice and Porcius Festus, the Roman procurator of Judea telling them of his life experience and his dramatic conversion. Jesus had appeared to Paul to give true purpose and meaning to his life. At this encounter he was appointed to two roles - servant and witness.

Paul outlined some of the qualities of a servant of the Lord in his second letter to Timothy. He said, "A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone, be able to teach, and be patient with difficult people." (2:24) When we hear and heed the instructions of our Lord and Master, He responds by calling us friends (cf. John 15:15). In this, we join an illustrious line of honorable servant friends of the Lord that includes patriarchs like Abraham, Moses and David, plus all the disciples who were both servants and friends of Christ. In this we enter a bonded relationship with the greatest servant friend of all time, the Lord Himself.

As servant friends of the Lord, we are called, as we learnt yesterday, to be witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). We are witnesses for the one who planned, promised and provides salvation to each of us. The Lord says, "First I predicted your rescue, then I saved you and proclaimed it to the world. No foreign god has ever done this. You are witnesses that I am the only God." (Isaiah 43:12)

> "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me." (John 12:26 NIV)

Matching the Measure

"*This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.*" Ephesians 4:13

This verse outlines three essential, complimentary and progressive aspects to being a true disciple of Christ. The first involves unity, the second - maturity, and the third - the attainment of a standard. The continual working of these three aspects fit us to be servants of Christ and witnesses to His saving grace.

Unity - Paul appeals to us to live in undivided harmony. He declares, "be of one mind, united in thought and purpose." (1 Corinthians 1:10) In another place he says, "Above all, put on love — the perfect bond of unity." (Colossians 3:14 HCSB)

Maturity - It is toward the end of the 'Love' chapter that Paul declares, "When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things." (1 Corinthians 13:11) In his second letter, Paul reminds the Corinthians, and us, to "Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you." (2 Corinthians 13:11)"

Measuring up - Our text for today says, "Measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ." What a standard! Paul new that he had not yet measured up but he says, " I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me." (Philippians 3:14) It is as we walk in step with our Lord that we learn to live as He lives.

"Nevertheless, let us live up to the standard that we have already attained." (Philippians 3:14 NET)

A Spiritual ECG

> "*However, when ambassadors arrived from Babylon to ask about the remarkable events that had taken place in the land, God withdrew from Hezekiah in order to test him and to see what was really in his heart*." 2 Chronicles 32:31

They were testing times. Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, had embarked on the conquest of Israel and Judah and Jerusalem was in his sights. King Hezekiah, who had amassed significant resources, had fortified Jerusalem and secured the cities water supply by building a tunnel from the Gihon spring through bedrock to the pool of Siloam. Sennacherib set up a siege around Jerusalem but the Lord intervened and Sennacherib's massive army was decimated.

Soon after this, Hezekiah fell sick and was expected to die. But the Lord answered his prayer and, through Isaiah, assured him of another fifteen years of life. This was confirmed with an astronomical miracle - the Lord turned time back (2 Kings 20:1-11). News of events in Jerusalem reached the king of Babylon, who sent envoys with gifts and greetings for Hezekiah. Our text tells us that the Lord withdrew from Hezekiah so He could "see what was really in his heart." Pride got the better of him and he showed the ambassadors all the wealth and resources of the kingdom.

Almost a century later, Nebuchadnezzar raped Jerusalem and took its treasures and people, including young Daniel, captive, as had been predicted by the prophet Isaiah.

What is really in our heart? What is the pulse of our life? Hezekiah's humility in sickness had turned to boasting and pride in recovery. We are on the path to healing and recovery. There needs be tests - spiritual ECG's as it were - that will reveal our true condition and level of commitment.

> "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." (1 Corinthians 10:12)

In Cardiac Failure

"*My heart beats wildly, my strength fails, and I am going blind.*" Psalm 38:10

Heart failure is a common condition where the heart fails to pump sufficient blood to meet the life supporting needs of the body. Sometimes it fails because it doesn't fill with enough blood either because of reduced blood volume or external pressures that prevent its expansion and filling. Sometimes it fails because it isn't strong enough, or because of damaged valves or faulty firing mechanisms, it is unable to pump sufficient blood. The remedy for heart failure is dependent on the cause. The first cause is addressed by increasing the volume of circulating blood with fluids or donated blood. The second by reducing the restrictions squeezing the heart. The next is managed by strengthening the contractions of the heart, but this is only effective if valve function and the firing mechanism can be improved.

It is very much the same with our spiritual life. Sometimes our spiritual life fails because we don't receive enough spiritual food. Maybe we need an infusion of life sustaining fluids from Jesus, the fount of living water. He says, "Anyone who believes in me may come and drink!" (John 7:38) He also offers heart strengthening nutrition. He says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again." (John 6:35)

We may need to address the bands of bad habits or the pressure of external influences that restrict or interfere with the free flow of our spiritual life. Maybe we need a pacemaker implant of steady but regular and balanced Bible study and devotional life to strengthen our spiritual experience. Maybe we need to resolve any doubts and confusion that is challenging our spiritual experience.

"O my son, give me your heart. May your eyes take delight in following my ways." (Proverbs 23:26)

Not For Resuscitation But For Regeneration

> "*This is a trustworthy saying: If we die with him, we will also live with him.*" 2 Timothy 2:11

Life is a precious gift. But there comes a time when the life support systems of the body begin to fail, when the 'Advance Directive' is activated - 'Do Not Resuscitate'. Is it that way with our spiritual life? Have we given up on any hope of a meaningful, living experience? Is the 'old self' causing problems, sending the spiritual heart into life threatening fibrillation? Maybe we need spiritual 'Electrical Cardioversion', to stop-start the spiritual heart, so as to get it to beat as it should. Or do we need spiritual 'Cardiac ablation' to destroy those triggers to temptation. Maybe we need both.

Paul expresses this process in so many different ways. Using his words, we can say, "Our old sinful self has been crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power. It is no longer we who live, but Christ lives in us. So we live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us and transforms us into a new person by changing the way we think." (Based on Galatians 2:20;Romans 6:6; 12:2)

There is no place for the old self in the new creature. The new self is filled with the divine presence. The heart now beats to the rhythm of the Master. The regenerate soul sings in harmony with the heavenly choir. The reborn being reflects the beauty of Christ who creates a clean heart and restores a right spirit in us (see Psalm 51:10).

> "For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God." (1 Peter 1:23)

Clay in the Potter's Hand

"*O Israel, can I not do to you as this potter has done to his clay? As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand.*" Jeremiah 18:6

There are many lessons that can be learned from a visit to a pottery. While Jeremiah was watching the potter mould a vessel on his wheel, something went wrong and he had to start over again. He had to rework the clay and then form it into another vessel. The Lord then declares that we are the clay in His hand.

Before a vessel can be made the clay must be prepared. This takes time and care. For a potter to make a useful vessel he needs clay of a certain consistency and quality. In the raw state, clay may be dry, hard, fixed and inflexible. Without adequate moisture it will only crack and crumble. But, if it is too wet, it will not hold it's shape, it will take on a distorted image or collapse into a useless heap. The potter is always careful to knead out any pockets of air that could cause the vessel to explode when fired. In the kneading process, the potter may find and have to remove bits of grit or other impurities that can spoil the texture of the clay.

The lessons are obvious. Our lives need the presence of the Water of Life to soften the hardness of our hearts. But excessive religiosity can result in distortions, disappointment and destructive despair. We need thorough kneading to eliminate pockets of doubt, to find and remove the impurities picked up from exposure to the corruptions of the world. All this may take time, perseverance and patience as the Master Potter prepares us for the final stage of shaping us into vessels of His choosing - vessels that have the touch of the master's hand and the mark of His creativity.

"Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way! Thou art the potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me after thy will, . . . " (Adelaide A. Pollard, 1902)

— Week Twenty-Nine —

KNOW GOD

"Oh, do we know God as we should? What comfort, what joy, we should have if we were to learn daily the lessons He desires us to learn! We must know Him by an experimental knowledge." (Ellen G. White, Prayer, p181)

Step 2

Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Be Still!

> "*Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!* "
>
> Psalm 46:10 NKJV

Our text for today begins with the simple imperative, "Be still". God is saying to us that if we really want to know Him we need to relax, take time out and let go the stresses and perplexities of life - to drop what we are doing, be quiet and pay attention. It is this principle that Jesus used when He said to His disciples, "Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile." (Mark 6:31)

In the very beginning, God took time out to rest from His creative work so as to establish a sanctuary in time in which we could let go, relax, and come to know Him. Our creator says, "Only in returning to me and resting in me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength." (Isaiah 30:15)

"When the mind of man is brought into communion with the mind of God, the finite with the Infinite, the effect on body and mind and soul is beyond estimate. In such communion is found the highest education. It is God's own method of development. "Acquaint now thyself with Him" (Job 22:21), is His message to mankind." (E.G. White, Acts of the Apostles, p.126) "Come to me", the Lord says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29 NIV) There is a willing yielding, a submission and surrender of the finite will to the infinite will and wisdom of God. "Be still, and know . . .".

> "For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs."
>
> Zephaniah 3:17

I Want To Know You!

"*O righteous Father, the world doesn't know you, but I do; and these disciples know you sent me.*"

John 17:25

How can we begin to know the High and Lofty One, the One who alone is Holy who lives in eternity, in unapproachable light? (Isaiah 57:15; cf.1 Timothy 6:16) Yet He assures us that He also lives with those who are hurting and humble (ibid.) What a comfort it is to know that the Mighty Lord, the Great and only God wants to know us and wants us to know Him and experience the comfort of His presence.

This has been and continues to be His desire. He says, "I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself." (Jeremiah 31:3) "Oh, do we know God as we should?" Ellen White asks in the quotation at the beginning of this weeks theme, but then suggests that "We must know Him by an experimental knowledge." (Prayer, 181) King David put it this way, "Taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!" (Psalm 34:8)

This is an abiding, safe and personal relationship with God that begins experimentally with a taste. Yes, it is a new experience that grows from a desire for the " pure milk of the word". It is an acquired taste, but a taste that develops into a desire, indeed craving, for more of the Lord's grace and goodness (cf. 1 Peter 2:2-3). And, even as babes grow and develop a desire for more solid food, so we too acquire a taste for the "solid food" of the Word - food that helps us to "recognize the difference between right and wrong." (cf. Hebrews 5:13-14) May our lives then become a sweet smelling savour as we grow in our relationship with God.

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

Look Upon Jesus

> "*And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself*." John 12:32

Nicodemus was perplexed by some of the answers Jesus gave to his questions. At this secret, night time encounter, Jesus made a startling prediction that leads into the most familiar passage of all scripture. He said, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." (John 3:14-15 NIV) Nicodemus never forgot that and, after Jesus death on the cross, assisted Joseph of Arimathea in giving Him a dignified burial.

In the wilderness experience, the rebellious Israelites had been attacked by poisonous serpents. To escape the certainty of death, those bitten were to look up to a brazen serpent on a pole. The Lord said, "anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." (Numbers 21:8 NIV) We are drawn to Christ as we contemplate his act of redemptive love on the cross. While He hung on the cross one of those who was crucified with Him, looked at Him, was drawn to him, acknowledged his worthlessness and then received the assurance of his acceptance into Christ's kingdom.

Let the words of the prolific hymn writer, Frank Beldon, be our song today:-

Look upon Jesus, sinless is He;
Father, impute His life unto me.
My life of scarlet, my sin and woe,
Cover with His life, whiter than snow.

Yes, look upon Jesus and live!

> "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:16 NKJV)

Know His Love

"*But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*" 1 John 4:8

John writes much of love and in our text for today he declares the very nature of God - "**God is love**". In creating mankind, He said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us." (Genesis 1:28) Mankind was made with the propensity to love and to respond to love. It is the purpose and expression of our beingness. If love lies inactive in us, if its expression has been suppressed or nigh snuffed out by hurts and relational pain, or by our own willfulness and sin, we would do well to join David in offering this prayer:-

"O LORD, I give my life to you. . . Remember me in the light of your unfailing love, for you are merciful . . Feel my pain and see my trouble. . . For the honor of your name, O LORD, forgive my many, many sins." (Psalm 25:1,7,18,11)

And the Lord replies emphatically:-

"I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself." (Jeremiah 31:3)

Even in this world of turmoil and trouble we find evidences of God's wondrous love. "The things of nature speak to man of his Creator's love. . . "God is love" is written upon every opening bud, upon the petals of every flower, and upon every spire of grass." (E.G. White, From Eternity Past p.435) It is seen in the fields and gardens that produce food to nourish and sustain our daily lives. But the greatest evidence of divine love is expressed in Jesus. "God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love . . ." (1 John 4:9-10FP)

"We love him, because he first loved us." (V.19 KJV)

Know His Forgiveness

"*But the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him*." Daniel 9:9

Their marriage of fifteen years had hit a rough spot. To resolve the issues, they agreed on the wife's suggestion to write 'issues' on a slip and drop it in individual "fault" boxes for one month. After the month they exchanged boxes. The wife had been diligent in noting the things that had irritated her during the month like dirty clothes lying around and leaving the lid off jars. The husband read the contents of his wife's box and reflected on all his 'failings'. The wife opened her husband's box and on each slip she read, "I love you!"

Buried within the pages of the Pentateuch, the five books written by Moses, lies this reassuring gem, "The LORD is slow to anger and filled with unfailing love, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion." (Num 14:18) To know His forgiveness is to find real peace. Isaiah calls us to choose the path of repentance and reject the very thought of wrongdoing. Then he advises us to "turn to the LORD that he may have mercy on [us]. Yes, turn to our God, for he will forgive generously." (See Isaiah 55:7)

To really know His forgiveness, we need to know what it cost. When Jesus offered the cup to His disciples at the last supper, He said, "this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice to forgive the sins of many." (Matt 26:28)

But to really know His forgiveness, we need to practice the art of forgiveness. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray He included this principle in the prayer. He taught them, "and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us." (Matthew 6:12)

> "Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:32)

Touch Me, Lord!

"*They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him*."

Mark 8:22 NIV

Touch, the primary sense of our being, is vital to survival. Stories of the detrimental effects on children deprived of meaningful touch in their early development have, in the past, hit the headlines. Most creatures respond to or even crave appropriate touch. Touch is foundational to bonding, belonging and well-being. It is as essential as food for survival and the need does not diminish as we grow older.

The story of the blind man in Bethsaida illustrates the importance of touch - touch that conveys a sense of perspective, place, presence, purpose and possibility. This was a man whose survival was dependent on touch - not only his ability to touch so as to know but touch so as to be known. His friends led him to Jesus with compassionate hands and asked Jesus for that healing touch. Jesus took his hand, led him out of the bustle of the town and touched his eyes twice, a process that transformed his uncertain hope into boundless certainty. He moved from the darkness of despair to the light of divine love.

Christ took on human nature so that He could bond more fully with us. His life was a living expression of God's compassion and care. He touched those who felt the finger of condemnation, shame and innuendo. He knew what it was to be abused verbally and physically. He knew rejection even from His disciples. He experienced the ultimate rejection for us when He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34 NKJV). But now that He is risen, let us accept the healing touch of our sinless Saviour.

"For we have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but who was in all points tempted as we are . . ." (Hebrews 4:15 WEB)

Know God Through Witness

> "*First I predicted your rescue, then I saved you and proclaimed it to the world. No foreign god has ever done this. You are witnesses that I am the only God," says the LORD*." Isaiah 43:12

There are two aspects to witnessing. There is the observational aspect - the seeing, the hearing, the experiencing aspect - without which the second aspect is impossible. The second is the declarational or proclamational aspect - the reporting, the telling, the recounting, the sharing, the modelling, the living it aspect - without which witnessing does not exist.

When we look in wonder into the vastness and magnificence of the universe, delight in the glory of a sunset or the colours of forest and flower, or discover the delicate design of even the minutest of things; when we hear the sounds of a bubbling brook, the song of a bird, the first words of a baby, and the very sounds of life; when we experience acts of kindness and compassion, the touch of His presence in Christ-like companionship; when we ponder the Word, walk through the pages of His-story and rest in His promises, we come to know God through that which we have witnessed observationally.

Then we are equipped to share our observations, experience and understanding through recounting, modelling, and reflecting the glory, grace and goodness of the One who has revealed Himself to us in so many ways. It is very true that we learn and retain knowledge best when we teach or share that knowledge with others. At Paul's conversion he was told that he was called to be God's witness, "telling everyone what you have seen and heard." (Acts 22:15)

> "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "and my servant . . , so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he." (Isa 43:10 NIV)

— Week Thirty —

TRUST GOD

"We are to trust God fully, and ask him to supply the least as well as the greatest want. . . . Having faith, and confidence, and trust in God, we have everything, and God will never betray our confidence. He is ever loving, and patiently bears with our weaknesses and infirmities, and is ever willing to forgive our perversities. Then let us walk meekly, trustingly, and humbly before him. Commit your way to him. Cast all your care upon him; for he careth for you."

(Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, March 21, 1893)

Step 3

Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

A Breach of Trust

> "*But like Adam, you broke my covenant and betrayed my trust*." Hosea 6:7

Adam and Eve were created in the image of God as responsive relational beings with the capacity to consider, cogitate and conclude - creatures capable of responsibility. They were entrusted with the governance and care of all the lesser creatures of this earthly domain, and the maintenance, management and development of their garden environment - a moral and covenantal responsibility they were to share with their future progeny, the whole of humanity.

Our primal forbears were presented with a simple test that would demonstrate their love and commitment to their creator - a covenantal test of trust. In their garden home were two specific trees, one whose fruit would sustain life perpetually and one that they were told not to touch or eat on pain of terminal consequences. In this one restriction, they were asked to respect the overall authority of their Creator. The betrayal of this trust broke the life-giving arrangement, saw them separated from the life-giving tree and the introduction of death to this earth.

From the time of our birth, we have longed for and sought relationships of trust. We know what a betrayal of trust can do to our relationships. We have been hurt by such breaches and, conversely, we have hurt others by our own breaches of their trust. But that is not the case with God, "he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." (Deuteronomy 31:8 NIV) "O Lord, you are a great and awesome God!" Daniel prayed, "You always fulfill your covenant and keep your promises" (Daniel 9:4)

> "Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked. But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God" (Habakkuk 2:4)

Trust God - Not Self

"*Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding.*" Proverbs 3:5

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" wrote Alexander Pope in his 'An Essay on Criticism'. He was echoing the sentiments of Solomon who reminds us that "Those who trust their own insight are foolish, but anyone who walks in wisdom is safe." (Proverbs 28:26)

Self-centeredness is expressed in pride and pride, we know, was the downfall of Lucifer (see Isaiah 14:12). Solomon penned this well known proverb, "Pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall." (Proverbs 16:18) Benjamin Franklin, one of the seven Founding Fathers of the United States, described pride this way, "There is perhaps no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive. Even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility."

There is an old adage that helps us see the folly of self-centeredness. It says, "The smallest package in the world is a person wrapped up in himself." The better mindset is the one which Jesus demonstrated. Paul puts it this way, "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had." (Philippians 2:3-5) His selfless, obedient, trusting and self-sacrificing life is set before us a model worthy of emulation. D. L. Moody once said, "God sends no one away empty except those who are full of themselves." You see, God longs to fill us with the desire and power to live Christ-like, selfless lives for Him.

"So do not throw away this confident trust in the Lord. Remember the great reward it brings you!"
(Hebrews 10:35)

Unquestioning Trust

> "*For the word of the LORD holds true, and we can trust everything he does.*" Psalm 33:4

The disciple nicknamed 'the twin' is remembered today for one thing, his doubting. There are but two recorded instances where 'Didymus' dialogues with Jesus - dialogues that reveal the lingering uncertainties that were his.

In the first of these dialogues, Jesus had just said, "Trust in God, and trust also in me. . . I am going to prepare a place for you . . . I will come and get you . . . And you know the way to where I am going." Thomas (Didymus) retorted, "No, we don't know, Lord. We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (See John 14:1-5)

The second dialogue occurs eight days after Christ's resurrection. Thomas had missed out on Jesus first encounter with the disciples the Sunday evening of the resurrection. He had declared, "I won't believe it unless I see . . ." Now, the Lord stood before him and invited him to touch the wounds in His hands and side. All doubts were expelled and he cried out with certainty, "My Lord and my God!" (See John 20:26-28)

When seeds of uncertainty sprout up as weeds in the fertile imaginations of the mind, they can quickly develop into trust destroying doubts. That was certainly the case with Adam and Eve. The same 'Serpent' that sowed seeds of uncertainty in the minds of our original parents, seeks to do the same in us. To combat this attack we are admonished to "Commit everything [we] do to the LORD. Trust him, and he will help [us]." (Psalm 37:5) Unwavering trust is the fruit of an abiding, confidence building relationship with our Lord.

> "You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy."
>
> (1 Peter 1:8)

Trust Jesus, Trust God

> "*Jesus shouted to the crowds, "If you trust me, you are trusting not only me, but also God who sent me.'"*
> John 12:44

It was just days before Passover. Jesus' mission to mankind was drawing to a close. The Word, who had created man in the first place, who had covered their shame with a sacrifice, who had, as the Son of man, come into this world to save sinners, now faced the reality of becoming the sacrifice for all those sins. It was in this context that Jesus cried out to the milling crowd in the Temple courtyard, "If you trust me, you are trusting . . . God who sent me."

There is no difference. Jesus had earlier said, "I and the Father are one." (10:30 NIV) But now he adds, "when you see me, you are seeing the one who sent me." (12:45) When we see Jesus healing, comforting, forgiving, restoring and raising the dead to life, we know that we can trust God to work out what is for our best good as we put our total trust in Him. Even as Jesus put His total trust in the authority of the Father and spoke and acted as the Father commanded, so we are called to likewise respond to the commands of our creator. (See 12:45-50)

A little later in that fateful week, Jesus said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me." (14:1) When we put our trust in Jesus and His saving grace, we are brought into in a trust relationship with the Father and are heirs of His kingdom of glory. But as His heirs, we are also called to share in His suffering (see Romans 8:17). Trust is tested in the cauldron of trials and tribulation. But, we are assured that, "God will keep in perfect peace all who trust in Him, all whose thoughts are fixed on Him!" (Isaiah 26:3)

> "Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong." (Ephesians 3:17)

Trust Him in Trials

> "I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?" Psalm 56:11

Bad things happen to people - sometimes at the hands of others, sometimes as a consequence of choices, sometimes bad things just happen. Sometimes bad things happen at the confluence of multiple factors that can suck us into a tornado of trials and tribulation. Such was the experience of Job who felt the full force of Satan's attacks on his integrity. Such was the experience of David, a Vietnam veteran.

David sustained life threatening and life changing multiple injuries when a phosphorus grenade he was about to throw was hit by an enemy bullet. He miraculously survived and was evacuated to Hawaii. During the initial surgery the phosphorus embedded in his flesh kept igniting on exposure, endangering his own life and the life of those treating him.

After the surgery David was taken to a ward where other severely injured soldiers were being cared for. He had once been handsome, but now, he feared his wife would reject him. He had seen that happen to a fellow patient. Her rejection cut deeper than any war injury and left him mortally wounded, without hope and without a future. David's wife arrived three days later but her response was totally different. Her love, understanding and acceptance gave him hope for the future and reinforced his relationship with God.

Since his recovery, David has had the opportunity to be a positive influence in the lives of many. He says, "I wouldn't trade anything I've gone through for the benefits my trials have had in my life . . ." As it was for David, God can turn our troubles and trials into a positive and fruitful experience.

> "So if you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you." (1 Peter 4:19)

Trust and Obey

> "*LORD, we show our trust in you by obeying your laws; our heart's desire is to glorify your name.*"
>
> Isaiah 26:8

Daniel Towner had shared his musical talent at a meeting being conducted by the 19th century American evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. It was in an after service testimony meeting that Daniel heard a young man stand up and say, "I am not quite sure - but I am going to trust, and I am going to obey." Those words so impressed him that he wrote them down, with the story, and sent them to a Presbyterian minister, John H. Sammis. From that experience a hymn of total commitment, 'Trust and Obey', was born - John writing the words and Daniel the music.

> Trust and obey, for there's no other way
> To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

When Jesus says, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest", do we trust and obey? (Matthew 11:28) "Give your burdens to the LORD, and he will take care of you." King David says, then adds, "I am trusting you to save me." (Psalm 55:22-23)

When Jesus says, "Come, follow me. . . I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life", are we ready to trust and obey Him in everything that He asks of us even when there seems only enough light to take one step?

When He says, "If you love me, obey my commandments" (John 14:15) are we ready to trust and obey? And when He says, " love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. . . . Pray for those who persecute you! . . Lend to them without expecting to be repaid.", what is our response? (Luke 6:27,35; Matthew 5:44)

> "Those who listen to instruction will prosper; those who trust the LORD will be joyful." (Proverbs 16:20)

The Joy of Trusting

> "*O LORD of Heaven's Armies, what joy for those who trust in you.*" Psalm 84:12

"Fearing people is a dangerous trap", King Solomon tells us, "but trusting the LORD means safety." (Proverbs 29:25) It looks very much like Solomon is reflecting on the words of his father, David, who declared, "The LORD is my strength and shield. I trust him with all my heart. He helps me, and my heart is filled with joy. I burst out in songs of thanksgiving." (Psalm 28:7)

Yes, there is safety in trusting the Lord, even when passing through the darkest valley. David sang about that experience in his Shepherd's Psalm where he extols the guidance, grace and goodness of God and ends with these words, "Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever." (Psalm 23:6)

The Apostle Paul declares his trust and confidence in God when he says, "I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13)

With that confident hope, Paul says, "Let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water. Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise." (Hebrews10:22-23)

> "You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls." (1Peter 1:8-9)

— Week Thirty-One —

CHOOSE GOD
CHOOSE GODLINESS

"Christ seldom attempted to prove that truth is truth. He illustrated truth in all its bearings, and then left His hearers free to accept or reject it, as they might choose. He did not force anyone to believe. In the Sermon on the Mount, He instructed the people in practical godliness, distinctly outlining their duty. He spoke in such a manner as to commend truth to the conscience." (Ellen G. White, Manuscript Releases, Vol.19, p.259)

Step 3

Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Created in His Image

> "*Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.""* Genesis 1:26

Our creator God gave humanity the capacity to take responsibility for the care and management of this planet. This was not to be a despotic, tyrannical role but one that reflected the beneficence of the creator Himself. It was in their garden home that Adam and Eve were to learn how to be a beneficent ruler. In providing this home with resources for sustaining life, the Lord was teaching humanity about their responsibility to nurture and share. This expression of beneficence was not only to reach out to mankind but to all creatures both great and small.

God's beneficence is expressed in His blessings. At the end of the fifth and sixth day of creation God placed a blessing on the procreative proliferation of every creature, but then, on the seventh day He added another element of beneficence in establishing a hallowed time of rest, reflection and remembrance. We are asked to not only honour our creator God on the weekly Sabbath of rest, but to also acknowledge the need for all creatures in our care to share in that rest(see Exodus 20:8-11).

God's beneficence is expressed in His loving desire to rescue and restore fallen humanity. His everlasting love is expressed in the gift of His only son who came to rescue and restore His likeness in all who would actively believe in Him. This restoration includes an eternal guarantee of life everlasting, a privilege we are committed to share.

> "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

The Challenge Before Us

> "*Forgetting the things that are behind and reaching out for the things that are ahead, with this goal in mind, I strive toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*" Philippians 3:13-14 NET

In his younger years he had everything going for him. He could boast that he had an unmatched zeal for God, a true Hebrew of Hebrews, a Benjaminite trained in the leading school of the Pharisees at the feet of the great Gamaliel and an assiduous upholder of the Law. In addition to this meritorious record, he was a Roman citizen having the rights and privileges that such citizenship afforded him. It would seem that he had it made, but Paul came to the conclusion that "these assets" were nothing more than a liability because of his encounter with Christ.

This encounter put everything into true perspective. All his efforts to attain to a righteous life could, in no way, compare to the value of knowing Christ and accepting God's gracious gift of righteousness, a gift that is totally dependant on Christ's faithfulness (see V.9 and Romans 5:17). Because of this gift, Paul says what we all need to say, "I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead" (Philippians 3:10).

We need to bury the past life of dead works and accept the newness of life that we can have in Christ. It is to such a life that we are called - a Christ-like life. This is the challenge, the goal, the choice that leads to godliness and brings us true contentment (cf. 1 Timothy 6:6). The godly life is a peaceful, peaceable and quiet life - a life measured by its honesty, respectfulness and reverence for God (1 Timothy 2:2).

> "Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness."
>
> (1 Timothy 6:11LP)

Deconstructing Developmental Flaws

> "*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.*"
>
> Hebrews 12:1

When Paul states emphatically that we all have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), he is stating an unfortunate truth acknowledged elsewhere in scripture. He draws from the Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Isaiah to paint a picture of the flaws and failings of humanity (see Vs.10-18). We can only concur because we know personally and empirically that it is true. On close examination we find that, all too often, our motives and aspirations, our thoughts and intents, our words and actions are flawed. Influences within and without our being, and before and after our birth, have shaped our character and impacted our behavior.

Prior to writing our text for today, the author of Hebrews wrote extensively of Bible characters who we know had flaws and failings yet "were commended for their faith." (11:29) We, like them, can 'strip off every weight', we can call upon One who can help us deconstruct our flaws and then experience renewal and restoration. Consider the following four steps as essential to the process:-

Acknowledge our wrongs and rebellion - (Psalm 51:4)

Accept God's assurance of forgiveness - (Hebrews 8:12)

Experience transformation and renewal - (Psalm 51:10)

Forget the past, don't dwell on it - (Isaiah 43:18)

> "But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, . . . In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God's love." (Jude 1:20-21)

Stepping Up To The Mark

> "*Mark out a straight path for your feet; stay on the safe path.*" Proverbs 4:26

Every athlete approaches an event with a clear plan for the race they have entered. Primary to their success is their ability to stay focussed on the implementation of that plan. Their coaches have studied their performances, evaluated their strengths and possible weaknesses with the intent of optimizing their outcome in the race. But no race is won without stepping up to the mark, the starting line.

God is our coach. He knows our strengths and weaknesses and He has a safe plan that is certain to give us success in the race of life, a plan that highlights our strengths and strengthens our weaknesses. Like many raw recruits to the realm of athletics, we need to turn from the ways of the world and focus on the race. God wants to make something of us. He has a good and pleasing and perfect plan for us. His plan is to take us and make us into "new person[s] by changing the way [we] think." (see Romans 12:2)

Some of us may feel that it's too late, but things that seem impossible to us become possibilities when God is given coaching rights in our lives. Jesus says, as He said to the father of a chronically tormented child, "Anything is possible if a person believes." Like that father, we can respond, "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:23-24) Unbelief is tantamount to failure in the race of life. Unbelief is full of uncertainty and doubts. These are roadblocks that interfere with the straight path that is set before us. But faith gives us the confidence to step up to the mark and press on toward the prize that is ours in Jesus. (see Philippians 3:14)

> "I replied, "But my work seems so useless! I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose. Yet I leave it all in the LORD's hand; I will trust God for my reward."" (Isaiah 49:4)

Responsible Reflection
(Reflecting God)

"*So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.*"

2 Corinthians 3:18

Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai in communion with God, receiving His instructions, directions, and commands. Such was the effect of this abiding experience that, when he came down from the mount, he reflected the glory of God in his visage. The radiance of his face was such that he had to wear a veil so people could approach him.

David declares, "I reflect at night on who you are, O LORD; . . . Oh, that my actions would consistently reflect your decrees!" (Psalm 119:55,5). What a challenge! But that is what we are called to be, indeed, what we were created to be - beings that reflect the nature and character of our creator whose living presence is expressed in the person of Jesus. It is in Him that we see and know God and in knowing Him we become like Him.

The early 20th century hymn by Lelia Morris challenges us with the question, "Do we live so close to the Lord today, . . . That the world in us can a likeness see To the Man of Calvary?" Then the chorus reiterates the challenge:-

Can the world see Jesus in me?
Can the world see Jesus in you?
Does your love to Him ring true,
and your life and service, too?
Can the world see Jesus in you?

"And you yourself must be an example to them by doing good works of every kind. Let everything you do reflect the integrity and seriousness of your teaching."

(Titus 2:7)

Growing in Grace

> "*Rather, you must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All glory to him, both now and forever! Amen.*" 2 Peter 3:18

Peter begins his second letter's message with these words, "May God give you more and more grace and peace as you grow in your knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord." (1:2) Then, starting from the foundation of faith, he outlines seven developmental milestones for the maturing child of God.

Moral excellence (goodness) - There is only one who is good and that is God (see Luke 2:14) So "Taste and see that the LORD is good." (Psalm 34:8) Commune with God, consume His goodness. (cf. James 1:7)

Knowledge - The Lord says, "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10) Jesus came to teach us and to give us understanding of He who is Truth, "And we can be sure that we know him if we obey his commandments." (1 John 2:3)

Self-control - It starts with the tongue. "For if we could control our tongues, we . . . could also control ourselves in every other way." (James 3:2)

Patient endurance (perseverance) - We are called, indeed commanded, to persevere in our faith in Jesus and obedience to God. (see Revelation 3:10; 14:12)

Godliness - Paul admonishes us to "Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness." (1 Timothy 6:11)

Brotherly affection - "Love each other with genuine affection (or brotherly love), and take delight in honoring each other." (Romans 12:10)

Love - "Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God." (1 John 4:7)

"The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:8)

Fullness From God

> "*May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*" Ephesians 3:19

When Paul wrote these words, he was a prisoner in Rome. He was writing to encourage the church in Ephesus and to share with them God's eternal plan and purpose. He writes, "And this is God's plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus." (V.6) We learn that this plan is accomplished "through Christ Jesus our Lord." (V.11) It is through our faith in Christ and His plan that "we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence" (V.12)

But there is also a purpose. He writes, "God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." (V.10) Later in this letter he speaks of these rulers and authorities as evil spiritual forces. We know how these forces work. We have experienced their influence. But we have been freed from their power by the mighty power of God's immeasurable love working in and for us through Jesus.

It is as we fully accept Christ into our hearts and allow Him to make His home there (see V.17) that we receive the fulness of God because "in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body." (Colossians 2:9). God's fullness is His love. Love that is so high, so deep, so encompassing so everlasting - love that fills us full and overflowing (Eph. 3:18).

> "Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think." (Ephesians 3:20)

— Week Thirty-Two —

LET GOD RELEASE ME
From
Hurts, Habits, Hangups and Obsessions

"All heaven is interested in men and women whom God has valued so much as to give His beloved Son to die to redeem them. No other creature that God has made is capable of such improvement, such refinement, such nobility as man. Then when men become blunted by their own debasing passions, sunken in vice, what a specimen for God to look upon! Man cannot conceive what he may be and what he may become. Through the grace of Christ he is capable of constant mental progress. Let the light of truth shine into his mind and the love of God be shed abroad in his heart and he may, through the grace Christ has died to impart to him, be a man of power—a child of earth but an heir of immortality."

(Ellen G. White, Maranatha, p.229)

Step 6

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Healing Those Harrowing Hurts

> "*Have compassion on me, LORD, for I am weak. Heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.*" Psalm 6:1

The Psalmist echos the cry of many of us who have been hurt along the pathway of life. Some hurts are self inflicted, some are caused by circumstances beyond our control and still others are caused by 'others'.The cause of the wound may no longer be the issue, but it's what we are doing or not doing to, with or for the wound that is important.

Wounds can be superficial or deep; open or closed and we may need professional help in treating them. Prompt attention to minor abrasions may be handled alone but when the trauma is more extensive we need help. Paul says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Hebrews 12:15) Unfortunately, some who offer help have little knowledge of how to deal with the hurts of others. The Lord says, "They offer superficial treatments for my people's mortal wound. They give assurances of peace when there is no peace." (Jeremiah 6:14 cf. 8:11)

Wounds that fail to heal quickly can develop what is aptly called 'proud flesh', an over response that prevents healing. When we over react to the hurts of life, when we let other factors enter and impede the healing process, the wound will persist. At such times we need help. We may need professional help, but certainly we need help from the One who can restore us. He says, "'I will restore you to health and heal your wounds,' declares the LORD . . ." (Jeremiah 30:17). Jesus, the great healer, says, "Come unto me." He offers rest, refreshment and restoration to every hurting soul.

> "O LORD, if you heal me, I will be truly healed; if you save me, I will be truly saved. My praises are for you alone!" (Jeremiah 17:14)

Placating the Pain of the Past

"*My guilt overwhelms me - it is a burden too heavy to bear. . . . All day long I walk around filled with grief.*"
Psalm 38:4,6

In the Psalm from which our text for today is taken, David outlines the devastating consequences of sin sickness. He says, "my whole body is sick; my health is broken because of my sins." (V.3) This is the theme of Psalm 38 where he speaks of festering wounds, raging fever, exhausting pain and the isolating consequences of his "disease".

Guilt is like the varicella-zoster (chicken-pox) virus that lies dormant in the nerve cells near the spine and, when activated many years later, cause the excruciatingly painful condition known as Shingles. Guilt is reactivated when we are reminded by events, situations, circumstances, encounters, memories or words that are triggers to the recollection of past indiscretions and shame. But, unlike Shingles which seldom occurs more than once, relapses of the painful feelings of guilt can sweep over us so frequently that we develop a chronic shame syndrome.

We find David, in another Psalm, crying out to the Lord, "Please listen and answer me, for I am overwhelmed by my troubles." (Psalm 55:2) Even his friend had taunted, belittled and betrayed him. We too, can experience the same feelings - the isolating effects of guilt and shame that can drive us into the wilderness of reproach, disappointment and despair.

But there is One who knows how to deal with the burden of overwhelming guilt. He says, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! . . . I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." (Isaiah 43:18-19, 25 NIV) David new this when he wrote:-

"Cast your burden on the LORD, And He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved." (Psalm 55:22)

Releasing the Shackles of Shame

> "*Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore, I have set my face like a stone, determined to do his will. And I know that I will not be put to shame.*" Isaiah 50:7

There are two words in this verse that carry a humiliating inference that damages our sense of worth more than anything else. To be publicly disgraced, to be put to shame hurts our ego, our self-image - the sense of who we are. Dr. Les Parrott puts it this way, "Shame is a spin-off from guilt. We may feel guilty for what we did, but we feel ashamed of who we are."

Paul, that murderous persecutor of the early church, had reason to know this. He laments his struggle with sin and expresses his shame when he says, "Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me . . ." (Romans 7:24) He felt like a person who had been, indeed deserved to be, pilloried and publicly humiliated.

But Paul doesn't leave it there. He goes on to say, "Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord." (V.25) Yes, Jesus! The One who "made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them" to cover their shame (Genesis 3:21) Who was pilloried for us on the cross, who bore our guilt and suffered our chastisement so that we could live in peace. The one who offers us His robe of righteousness to cover our shame.

Yes, the Sovereign LORD is ready to helps us, as our text for today suggests. It is in choosing to do His will, in permitting Him to purge away the stain of our sin and shame with His precious blood that we are freed from the shackles of the past. Let our prayer be:-

> "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." (Psalm 51:7 NIV)

Habits and Habits

> "*Do not be deceived: "Evil company corrupts good habits*." 1 Corinthians 15:33 NKJV

We are creatures of habit. Whether we like it or not, habits shape the person we are and influence what we believe. They affect our physical, mental and emotional state, and impact our level of success as well as our perceptions of it.

Behavioural psychologists tell us that habits are a three stage loop that reinforces and perpetuates a behaviour. A habit is initiated by something that activates, reminds or triggers a pattern of activity (routine) that leads to a desired outcome (reward). The reward may then be the cue to a repetition of the behaviour - a second or third piece of chocolate, why not!

Paul warns us that 'evil company' endangers our good habit patterns. Negative triggers, cues and reminders can get in the way of our best intentions to build and maintain good habits or to decommission and deconstruct bad habits. In the Christian walk, fellowship and purposeful living provide positive protection against the bad habits of idleness and gossip.

But the greatest protection against the formation of bad habits is to maintain our walk with God. What a powerful influence such a habit has is described by a short statement in Genesis. It tells us that Enoch 'walked faithfully', 'habitually' and 'lived in close fellowship' with God for 300 years after the birth of Methuselah (cf. Genesis 5:22-24 NIV, YLT and NLT) and this habit prepared him for the realms of heaven. Our character development comes from constant and consistent exposure to the Divine nature as expressed most completely in the life of Jesus.

> "Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus." 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

The Junkie In Us

> "*What sorrow for those who get up early in the morning looking for a drink of alcohol and spend long evenings drinking wine to make themselves flaming drunk*." Isaiah 5:11

The word 'junkie' has it's origins in the 1920s. Originally used to refer to drug addiction, it now has the broader meaning of 'a person with an insatiable craving for something', or even more broadly, 'an enthusiastic follower; fan; or devotee'. That's a rather all encompassing definition that, like a net, takes in many of our behaviours.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul lists a sample of behaviours that includes aberrant sexuality, greed, deception, addiction, abuse and even idolatrous worship (see 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Then he says, "Some of you were once like that. . ." (V.11fp) Could it be that, in some similar way, we need to deal with the junky in us? Addiction takes many forms, but surely the most subtle is the one that is cloaked in the garb of 'goodness' and respectability - the sweet wine of misdirected devotion.

As Jesus was closing His sermon on the mount, He declared, "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Despite their protestations of devoted service, the Lord declares, "I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws." (Matthew 7:21-23). Could it be that even in our enthusiastic devotion to God, we fail to enter into an abiding covenant with Him; a genuine (not defacto) relationship of oneness where we call the Lord "my husband", not "my master" (see Hosea 2:16).

> "I will make you my wife forever, showing you righteousness and justice, unfailing love and compassion. I will be faithful to you and make you mine, and you will finally know me as the LORD."
> Hosea 2:19-20

Hanging Up The Hang-ups

> "*And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*." John 8:32

Hang-ups are feelings of anxiety about real or imaginary flaws or failings. Most hang-ups have their roots in our childhood where comparisons and criticisms damage our self-confidence. In this imperfect world, we all have hang-ups. They can be physical, psychological or social in nature and can lead to self-loathing, feelings of worthlessness, obsessiveness, phobias, paranoia and even perfectionism.

King Saul had hang-ups. He had been anointed king by Samuel but at his inauguration he had hidden amongst the baggage. He was tall, "head and shoulders taller than anyone else" (1 Samuel 10:23) yet he had lingering doubts about himself and what people thought of him. From the Biblical narrative, we see that, despite all he had going for him, he was sensitive to comparisons - "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands!". This made Saul angry and he said,"Next they'll be making him their king!" (1 Samuel 18:7-8) His hang-ups over David's imagined intentions ultimately led to his downfall.

What, then, can we do to confront our hang-ups? Paul, in writing to the Ephesian believers who had been saved from the clamour of worldly wrangling, malice and bitterness, prays, "That the eyes of your heart may be enlightened . . . that you may know the hope to which he has called you . . . and his incomparably great power for us who believe." (Ephesians 1:18-20) This is the assurance of the gospel. In Christ who cares for us, we are able to hang up our hang-ups, take hold of the certainty of acceptance and:-

> ". . . let God transform [us] into a new person by changing the way [we] think. Then [we] will learn to know God's will for [us], which is good and pleasing and perfect." (Romans 12:2 rendered in the 1st person)

Kicking the Compulsion

> "*And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong.*" James 3:4

Compulsions are driven by obsessions. Obsessions are driven by fear, guilt, shame and other persistent and painful negative emotions influenced by the changing climate of life.

John Bunyan, in his autobiographical book, *Grace Abounding To the Chief of Sinners*, describes his struggle with a crippling storm of obsessive and blasphemous thoughts - a compelling compulsion to reject Christ. "These things may seem ridiculous to others," he wrote, "even as ridiculous as they were in themselves, but to me they were the most tormenting cogitations." Such was his despair that he cried out, " How can God comfort such a wretch as I?" Then the words of the Apostle, John, came to him as a hope and a comfort, "but not every sin leads to death." (1 John 5:17) Bunyan found assurance in the prayer of the Psalmist who wrote, "From the depths of despair, O LORD, I call for your help. . . But you offer forgiveness, . . ." (Psalm 130:1,4)

King David could speak from a position of experience when he prayed, "Though we are overwhelmed by our sins, you forgive them all." (Psalm 65:3) We find in these short words a rudder of assurance that holds us on course as we battle the destructive winds of compulsive thoughts. The Lord sees our struggle and hears our cry, "we are perishing", and then He speaks to our troubled thoughts and says, "Peace, be still!" (see Mark 4:38,39 NKJV) And when doubts creep in, the Lord reminds us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

> ""Come now, let's settle this," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool." (Isaiah 1:18)

— Week Thirty-Three —

LET GOD REMOVE MY HYPOCRISY

"If the Christian thrives and progresses at all, he must do so amid strangers to God, amid scoffing, subject to ridicule. . . .They walk with God, deriving strength and grace from him to withstand the moral pollution surrounding them. . . . They are virtuous in spirit amid depravity; they are true and loyal, fervent and zealous, while surrounded by infidels, hypocritical professors, godless and worldly men. Their faith and life are hid with Christ in God. Jesus is in them a well of water springing up into everlasting life. Faith, like the rootlets of the palm-tree, penetrates beneath the things which are seen, drawing spiritual nourishment from the fountain of life" (Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, 1879)

Step 6

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Living the Lie

> "*But you, however, are inventors of lies; all of you are worthless physicians!*" Job 13:4

That was Job's summation of his three friends, eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Their presumptive conclusions as to the cause of Job's suffering did nothing to sooth it. They presumed that his pain was the fruit of his own folly. Job continued to defend himself saying, "I will never concede that you are right; I will defend my integrity until I die." (27:5) Does that sound familiar?

Of course, Job's friends had come to the wrong conclusions. God, Himself, had said that Job was "blameless—a man of complete integrity" (1:8), but, in the end, He confronts Job with these words, " "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words?" (38:2) Despite his impeccable standing, Job could get it wrong. After listening to all the Lord had to say, he answered, "I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance." (42:5-6)

Job and his friends had to 'eat their words'. Like them, we can get it wrong, but that is not necessarily 'living the lie'. The one who was living the lie (and still lives it) is Satan. He presumed wrongly that Job's integrity would crumble in a crisis, that he was right and God was wrong. It is when we presume to challenge God and claim to know or understand a matter better than He that we, also, live the lie. Jesus, the Word made flesh, said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) In Him there is consistency and reliability. It is when we actively acknowledge that "there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:7) in how God would have us live, that we turn from living the lie to living the truth.

> "Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding." (Proverbs 3:5)

The Root of Hypocrisy

> "*And so the Lord says, "These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.""* Isaiah 29:13

One Sunday back in the 17th century, King Louis XIV of France and his attendants arrived at the chapel for the regular service only to find it empty but for the court preacher, Francois Fenelon. Dismayed by the situation, the king demanded an explanation. Fenelon replied, "I had published that you would not come to church today, in order that your Majesty might see who serves God in truth and who flatters the king."

When we look at this story closely, we may wonder who is the most hypocritical. Think of it! Fenelon could well have been testing the hypocrisy of both congregation and king. He may also have been ingratiating himself to the king and, in so doing, acting the hypocrite. Hypocrisy is not far from the life and lips of us all. The often disingenuous nature of human interaction has its roots in the perception of self and others. Hypocrisy may be a part of self-preservation or self-aggrandisement. It enters into the market place, the entertainment scene, our social interactions and our homes.

A Prince was once toasted with the words of John Dryden, "A man so various that he seem'd to be Not one, but all mankind's epitome." The Prince liked the lines until he looked up the poem. It continued, "Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong; Was everything by starts, and nothing long: But, in the course of one revolving moon, Was chemist, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon." Paul warns us:-

> "Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us."
>
> (Romans 12:3)

The Bubble of Pretense

> "*Beware of these teachers of religious law! For they like to parade around in flowing robes and love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces. And how they love the seats of honor in the synagogues and the head table at banquets. Yet they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property and then pretend to be pious by making long prayers in public. Because of this, they will be severely punished.*" Luke 20:46-47

The popular mid 20th century singing group, the Platters, made Buck Ram's song, 'The Great Pretender' famous. The song echos the situation that we may all have experienced at some point in time when it says, "yes I'm the great pretender, pretending that I'm doing well; My need is such I pretend too much, I'm lonely but no one can tell."

Do we use masks to cover up our real self and our real situation? Solomon observed, "Some who are poor pretend to be rich; others who are rich pretend to be poor." (Proverbs 13:7) We could substitute other couplets like 'happy-sad', or 'sick-well' or 'satisfied-unsatisfied to describe patterns of pretense common to our life experience. Our text for today describes a particularly evil form of pretense that covers evil practices with pseudo sanctimoniousness and pious public prayers.

In society there are multiple forms of con artistry that people use to beguile, badger or bluff their way through life and leave a path of pain as a consequence of their selfishly motivated actions. The question is, are we living in a similar bubble of pretense? Such bubbles have a habit of bursting, often with painful consequences. Let us heed Paul's advice:-

> "Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good."
> (Romans 12:9)

The Sin of Self-Righteousness

> "*Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else:*" Luke 18:9

"Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector." (V.10) In his prayer, the Pharisee boldly boasts of his so-called sin-free life, his piousness and generosity. To top it off he reminds God. "I'm certainly not like that tax collector!" (V.11) In contrast, the tax collector, filled with remorse, prayed, "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner." (V.13) But Jesus concludes that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, is justified.

Blameless and upright Job raises the rhetorical question, "But how can a man be righteous before God?" (Job 9:2 NKJV) Then, after extolling the absolute wisdom, majesty and power of God, he declares, "Though I were righteous, my own mouth would condemn me; Though I were blameless, it would prove me perverse." (V.20 NKJV) When we stand before the awesome and glorious majesty of God we are struck with the puniness of our own efforts. We, with Isaiah, cry out, "We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags." (Isaiah 64:6)

There is but one remedy for self-righteous boasting and it comes to us from the Lord Himself who declares:-

> "This is what the LORD says: "Don't let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the LORD who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things. I, the LORD, have spoken!"
>
> (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

On Being Genuine

> "*As they approached, Jesus said, "Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity.*"
> John 1:47

The popularity of the long running BBC produced Antiques Roadshow tells us something about the interest of people in evaluating the authenticity and value of articles in their possession. One segment of the program has people try to pick the fake. Paul writes, "Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is [in] you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith." (2Corinthians 13:5)

The mark of genuineness is found in the integrity of our relationship with our creator and our fellows. Do we bear the marks of His handiwork in our lives? Has He transformed our lives and shaped us into loving and lovable disciples and servants? In writing to Timothy, Paul says, "The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith." (1Timothy 1:5)

In the hands of the master craftsman, we are transformed from the confusion, brokenness and strife of our lives into something beautiful. A genuine restoration carries the mark of authenticity, and a tested provenance. The provenance of a genuine Christian is found in the expression and practice of that which is written in the heart - the covenant of love. The authenticity of this internal documentation is verified by a wholehearted commitment to loving and obeying God and living His love in genuine love for others. Jesus brother puts it in terms of religious practice when he says:-

> "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you." (James 1:27)

Rooted and Grounded in Christ

> "*Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong*." Ephesians 3:17

Plant life is dependant on its root system for the absorption, storage and supply of nutrients and water, the support and anchoring of the plant, and, in some cases, for reproduction and competitive advantage. A fig tree in South Africa has the deepest known root that reaches to a depth of 122 metres (400 feet). Calcutta botanical gardens has a Banyan tree that has 1,775 support roots and covers three acres.

A tall tree is dependent on a strong root system anchored deep and spread wide in supportive soil. Our text uses vegetal terms to describe the development of a deep, abiding and unmoveable relationship with the divine source of our being, the rich loam of God's immeasurable and everlasting love.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the elements of God's garden loam that provide for balanced growth and peaceful coexistence with others who are sharing life in the garden of God's goodness. Foundational to the mix are God's everlasting righteousness and His merciful justice. These interact with the abundance of His unfailing love and the constancy of His trustworthy truth. These elements provide for a rich environment for spiritual growth and character maturation. Let us sink the roots of faith deeper into God's love and wrap tightly around the rock, Christ Jesus, who is our strength and stay during the storms of life.

> "And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness."
> (Colossians 2:6-7)

Living the Pure and Simple Life

> "*If you keep yourself pure, you will be a special utensil for honorable use. Your life will be clean, and you will be ready for the Master to use you for every good work.*" 2 Timothy 2:21

Paul continues with some sound advice on living the pure and simple life. He gives two situations to avoid and presents a powerful list of positive attitudes and actions to pursue.

Things to avoid -

a) anything that stimulates youthful lusts (V.22). The worldly media and entertainment convey such images and ideas.
b) foolish and ignorant disputes that start fights (V.23). These create divisiveness and ill-feeling.

Positive attitudes and actions to pursue - (Vs.22,24-25)

a) **righteous living** - the product of obedience (see Romans 6:16). The Lord longs to see "an endless river of righteous living" flow from us. (Amos 5:24)
b) **faithfulness to God** - this is expressed in consistently "living according to the truth" (see 3 John 1:3)
c) **love** - "may the Lord make [our] love for one another and for all people . . . overflow" (see 1 Thessalonians 3:12)
d) **peace** - Peter quotes Psalm 34:14 when he writes, "Search for peace, and work to maintain it." (1Peter 3:11)
c) **godly companions** - With David, let us say, "I will search for faithful people to be my companions." (Ps.101:6)
f) **be kind to all** - The Lord says, "Judge fairly, and show mercy and kindness to one another." (Zechariah 7:9)
h) **gently teach** - "Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives." (Colossians 3:16)
i) **patient endurance** - "is what [we] need now, so that [we] will continue to do God's will." (Hebrews 10:36)

> "Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness." (1Tim.6:11)

— Week Thirty-Four —

LET GOD CORRECT MY COVETOUSNESS

"God cannot approve of the least degree of covetousness or selfishness, and He abhors the prayers and exhortations of those who indulge these evil traits. As Satan sees that his time is short, he leads men on to be more and more selfish and covetous, and then exults as he sees them wrapped up in themselves, close, penurious, and selfish. If the eyes of such could be opened, they would see Satan in hellish triumph, exulting over them, and laughing at the folly of those who accept his suggestions and enter his snares." (Ellen G. White, Early Writings 268)

Step 6

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

The King of Covetousness

> "*For you said to yourself, 'I will ascend to heaven and set my throne above God's stars. . . . I will climb to the highest heavens and be like the Most High.'*"
>
> Isaiah 14:13-14

This is an indictment directed against a being of outstanding beauty bearing the descriptive Hebrew name "heylel" which is variously translated 'Day Star', 'Morning Star', or 'Lucifer'. Biblical scholars link this description to one who was a gifted and glorious cherub until pride got the better of him (Ezekial 28:11-19). He was so full of himself that he coveted the powers and prerogatives of God and sought to attain an authority and position matching or even surpassing that of his creator.

And when his creator condescended to come into this world as a babe, took upon himself the role of a servant, Lucifer, the one called the Devil and Satan sought to seduce him who had given him being into worshipping him. In this temptation is seen the magnitude of his covetousness, pride and arrogance.

The word 'hubris' is an infrequently used term that denotes this over-confident state of mind, the state of mind that precedes a fall. The preceding verse to our text for today describes Lucifer's fall this way, "How you are fallen from heaven, O shining star, son of the morning! You have been thrown down to the earth, you who destroyed the nations of the world." The hubristic nature of Satan's thinking is depicted in the words of Milton's epic poem, 'Paradise Lost'. In it, Lucifer is cast out of heaven and Milton has him say, "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

> "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you.""
>
> (Hebrews 13:5 NKJV)

Eyes That Covet

> "*But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*" Matthew 5:28

These words of Jesus point to a common human failing, the lustful look. Solomon, possibly from his personal experience, warns of the dangers of the lustful look when he says, "Don't lust for her beauty. Don't let her coy glances seduce you." (Proverbs 6:25) This verse speaks of two persons who are looking. One must ask, what prompts the coy glances? Lust is not gender specific but gender inclusive.

The lustful look is a form of covetousness and Paul tells us that we should "put to death" such earthy, sinful expressions of our nature. He explains that covetousness is a form of idolatry. (see Colossians 3:5)

Lust knows no bounds. What about the look that leads to gluttony, or the desire that drags us into indebtedness. Whether it be food or fast cars, fame or fortune, we are surrounded by things that our "eyes" (our sensile receptors) perceive, our minds process and we respond to. But we have a choice as to how we respond.

Paul gives us some helpful advice as to how we should respond to tempting sensile stimuli.

Run (escape) - In 1 Corinthians 6:18 he says, "Run from sexual sin!" because it is a sin against our own body. Surely this same principal applies to gluttony, addictive substances and other harmful or dangerous practices.

Clean up our thinking - "let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit." (2 Cor. 7:1)

Walk in the Spirit - "let the Holy Spirit guide [our] lives. Then [we] won't be doing what [our] sinful nature craves." (Galatians 5:16)

"I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and . . . to keep my laws." (Ezekiel 36:27NIV)

Covetous Cheats

> "*When you want* (covet) *a piece of land, you find a way to seize it. When you want someone's house, you take it by fraud and violence. You cheat a man of his property, stealing his family's inheritance.*"
>
> Micah 2:2

"Close Shave Uncovers Marathon Fraud". So read the Associated Press headline. Marathon runner, Abbes Tehami of Algeria, had crossed the finish line of the 1991 Brussels Marathon first. The race had an attractive $7,150 prize but Tehami failed to get it. Somehow he had lost his moustache during the race. The one who started the race was not the person who finished it. Tehami's coach, Bensalem Hamiani, had the moustache and started the race, but transferred the bib No.62 to Tehami in a wooded area 12 km into the race.

Cheating undermines trust and destroys relationships. Once discovered, it quickly destroys confidence and cohesion, ruins one's reputation and creates a negative stigma. But, even before it is discovered, it eats away at the cheater's own moral self-worth. Life becomes a pretense, a sham, a disappointment and even a self-loathing that may develop into a mental health issue such as depression.

Cheats (extortioners, swindlers) are among a category of individuals - the immoral, idolaters, thieves, the greedy, aggressive and addicted - who, Paul says, won't inherit the kingdom of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:8-10). Apparently, some in the Corinthian church had been cheating or defrauding. This sad situation was bringing dishonour to the Lord and the tenuous reputation of His church. Let us remember that only Christ can free us from the soul destroying folly of cheating and give us the will to live honestly in this world.

> "Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable."
>
> (Romans 12:17)

Penurious Penny-Pinchers

> "*A miserly man hastens after wealth, and does not know that want will come upon him.*"
>
> Proverbs 28:22 RSV

The adjective, 'penurious', can be used to describe the sad state of extreme poverty that some people find themselves in, but it is also used to describe the mean or miserly nature of Scrooge-like people whose close-fisted greed strips them of any real generosity.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a story entitled 'How Much Land Does a Man Need'. In the story a successful farmer was given a novel offer to increase his land-holding. For just ₽1,000 (Rubles) he could purchase all the land he could walk around in one day provided he was back to the starting point by sunset. In the morning, he started walking at a brisk pace to encompass as much land as possible. In the afternoon he realised that he was far from his starting point so he started running. As the sun sank below the horizon he lurched across the line, collapsed, and died. He got all the land he needed - about two metres by one metre.

This reminds us of the parable of the 'Rich Fool'. He had such a bountiful crop that he decided to pull down his barns and build bigger ones. His plan was to secure a leisurely future. "But God said to him, 'You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for?" (Luke 12:20) In introducing this story, Jesus said, "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed (covetousness). Life is not measured by how much you own." (V.15) Isaiah presents a similar message about the foolishness of the indulgent, self-sufficient, smug and complacent lifestyle that lacks generosity toward others (cf. Isaiah 32:5-7,9). In contrast, he describes the opposite of such penurious penny-pinchers:-

> "But generous people plan to do what is generous, and they stand firm in their generosity." (Isaiah 32:8)

The Curse of Covetousness

> "*For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred.*" 2 Timothy 3:2

Looking into the future to the difficult times of the 'last days', Paul paints a picture of social self-centeredness that reads as if it were an assessment of current social attitudes and conduct. He describes a time when, under the guise of pious respectability, some will present a 'counterfeit faith' that will win the confidence of a vulnerable, self-loving and intemperate society.

The name, John D Rockefeller, is linked to wealth and generosity. The son of a philandering itinerant salesman but a devout mother, John drove himself to make money. His business success saw him a millionaire at thirty-three, in control of the worlds largest business by forty-three and the worlds richest man ten years later. But he was dogged by anxiety and depression, alopecia and digestive disorders, and was despised by those upon whom he had trampled in his rise to fame and fortune. It seemed that the curse of covetousness was about to snuff out his life.

True are the words of Paul who wrote, "For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows." (1 Timothy 6:10) Fortunately, Rockefeller realised that his covetous ways would destroy him and bar him from the kingdom of God. He became a genuine philanthropist, sharing his wealth with many worthy causes. His spirit revived, his health returned and he lived another forty-five generous years.

> "But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness." (1 Timothy 6:11 NIV)

Conquering Covetous Desires

> "*But sin used this command to arouse all kinds of covetous desires within me! If there were no law, sin would not have that power.*" Romans 7:8

In the preceding verse Paul writes, "I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "You must not covet."" This, the last of the ten commandments, goes to the very heart of the problem of sin. It deals with the management of our motives - our innermost thoughts, attitudes, intents and desires. Motives are the dynamos, the drivers of behaviour.

One day, when Jesus was teaching the multitude, He was asked to intervene in a dispute over an inheritance. This prompted him to say, "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed (covetousness). Life is not measured by how much you own." (Luke 12:15) Things don't make us! We need to let this point sink down deep into our inner psyche. Then:-

Discard the deeds of darkness - "don't let [us] think about ways to indulge [our] evil desires." (Romans 13:14)

Put on the armour of light - "clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Ibid) who is the light. Let Him reside in our hearts and ground us in His love. (see Ephesians 3:17-19)

Fix our focus - Paul says, "I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13)

Press on and hold on - don't give ground, press on toward the goal, the heavenly prize (cf. V.14,16).

> "And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires." (2 Peter 1:4)

The Better Way

> "*So you should earnestly desire* (covet) *the most helpful gifts. But now let me show you a way of life that is best of all.*" 1 Corinthians 12:31

In this verse, Paul introduces what is known as the love chapter. He introduces it by saying, "And now I will show you an even better way - a way that is beyond comparison - a way of life that is best of all."(V.31LP HCSB, NET, NLT) Then he concludes by saying, "Let love be your highest goal!" (Ch.14:1) The better way is the way of 'agape' love.

Starting from a foundation of faith, Peter describes the step by step path to that better way. Each step is integral to attaining the goal of godly living. So he tells us to be diligent in adding the qualities of moral excellence, knowledge of God's will and mastery over our desires and passions. These lead to enduring loyalty and a life lived to the glory of God within a community of faith where kindness and 'agape' love abound (see 2 Peter 1:5-7).

Agape type love is described as being patient and kind, fair and forgiving, humble and hopeful; it is tender, tenacious and truthful. (1 Corinthians 13) Agape love is the greatest of a triune of everlasting qualities that includes faith and hope (V.13). Indeed, faith and hope are entwined in love. (cf. V.7)

Love is an expression of the divine nature, because "God is love." (1 John 4:8) And it is this love that God has gifted to us through His son, Jesus. It is as we devote ourselves to knowing God and His Son, Jesus, as we accept the gift of a "share [in] his divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), that we are able to escape the corrupting covetous influence of human desires and walk 'the better way'.

> "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." (1 John 4:7 NIV)

— Week Thirty-Five —

LET GOD CLEAN UP MY COMMUNICATION

"Life is what we make it, and we shall find what we look for. If we look for sadness and trouble, if we are in a frame of mind to magnify little difficulties, we shall find plenty of them to engross our thoughts and our conversation. But if we look on the bright side of things, we shall find enough to make us cheerful and happy. If we give smiles, they will be returned to us; if we speak pleasant, cheerful words, they will be spoken to us again" (Ellen G. White, The Adventist Home, p.430)

Step 6

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Corrupt Communications

> "*Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.*"
>
> Ephesians 4:29

"Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth." So begins the King James version of this verse. Jesus makes the point that "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." (Luke 6:45 NIV)

Our communications are but a reflexion of our inner state. Two verses after our key text Paul presents six aspects of the inner state that grieve the Holy Spirit. He begins with bitterness - the fermenting product of an unwillingness to forgive. Bitterness grows with each reminding and retelling. Then he adds the twin flints of anger and wrath. These ignite the tongue which, when fanned by twisted thinking, shoots out fiery flames of hurtful, slanderous and malicious words. David puts it this way, "The more I thought about it, the hotter I got, igniting a fire of words." (Psalm 39:3)

James is even more scathing of the tongue. He describes it as "a small thing", a "tiny spark", "a flame of fire" that "can set [our] whole life on fire." (James 3:5-6) Jesus includes anger, disparaging comments and the cursing of others within the context of the sixth commandment (see Matthew 5;21-22). John reinforced this point when he wrote, "Anyone who hates another brother or sister is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don't have eternal life within them." (1 John 3:15) This should prompt us to seek a solution and Paul gives us one just three verses after our key text for today. He says:-

> "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (V.32)

The Two Edged Tongue

> "*From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. These things should not be so, my brothers and sisters.*" James 3:10 NET

Solomon puts it even more bluntly, "The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences." (Proverbs 18:21) In a later chapter he makes this observation, "Just as damaging as a madman shooting a deadly weapon is someone who lies to a friend and then says, "I was only joking."" (26:18-19)

James, like Solomon, talks much of the untameable nature of the tongue. He says, "Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God." (James 3:9) Solomon makes this disturbing observation, "There is more hope for a fool than for someone who speaks without thinking." (Proverbs 29:20)

Ellen White writes, "In one moment, by the hasty, passionate, careless tongue, may be wrought evil that a whole lifetime's repentance cannot undo. Oh, the hearts that are broken, the friends estranged, the lives wrecked, by the harsh, hasty words of those who might have brought help and healing!" (Education p. 236) Then she quotes these words of Solomon, "Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing." (Proverbs 12:18)

Let us carefully consider the consequences of our words. Jesus makes it very clear when said, "Whatever is in your heart determines what you say. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. . . . The words you say will either acquit you or condemn you." (Matthew 12:34-37)

> "If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless." (James 1:26)

Our Unspoken Words

"*Whoever winks his eyes plans dishonest things; he who purses his lips brings evil to pass*."

Proverbs 16:30 ESV

Nehemiah, king Artaxerxes' cupbearer, had received distressing news of the situation in Jerusalem. His deep concern for those who had returned to Jerusalem was so etched into his face that it was noticed by the king. He said, "Why are you looking so sad? You don't look sick to me. You must be deeply troubled." (Nehemiah 2:2) Nehemiah couldn't hide his feelings from the king. Artaxerxes read him like a book. No words were uttered but the message was clear.

In the introduction to his book, 'Body Language in the Bible, David Carpenter writes, "We know that watching someone's face is an important part of any human interaction . . . Our face can confirm or contradict our words." Then he adds, "The way we stand, sit, walk and gesture is often more important than our words."

Indeed, nonverbal communication can be used to mislead, entice, deceive and dominate. That is what Solomon is describing in our text for today. Isaiah writes, "The very look on their faces gives them away. They display their sin like the people of Sodom and don't even try to hide it." (Isaiah 3:9)

Jesus touches on nonverbal communication in the Sermon on the Mount. He declared, "When you fast, do not look sullen like the hypocrites, for they make their faces unattractive so that people will see them fasting." (Matthew 6:16 NET) Oh Lord, teach us how to convey nothing but your love, care and compassion through our unspoken words.

"Then I will purify the speech of all people, so that everyone can worship the LORD together."

(Zephaniah 3:9)

What's in a Look?

> "*And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.*"" (Luke 22:61 NKJV)

Our eyes are the focal point of nonverbal communication. We convey multiple messages with our eyes and face. We are instinctively drawn to focus on the face and eyes of others to observe their responses and reactions to our presence and pronouncements, and to get an idea of their thoughts and intent. When we read about Peter's reaction to that brief moment of eye contact with Jesus at His trial, we are reminded of the power of a glance, the setting and circumstances leading up to it, and the meaning we read into it. Peter realized that Jesus' prediction of his denials had just been fulfilled, "So [he] went out and wept bitterly." (V.62)

Looks take many forms. They can be alluring or lustful, condoning, condemning or credulous. They can express love and compassion, expectation or alarm, humility or haughtiness, tenderness or disdain, anguish or rejection. We have all experienced such looks and have intentionally or unintentionally, wittingly or unwittingly expressed the same. Looks can be misinterpreted and misunderstood as a consequence of faulty perceptions, beliefs, desires, thoughts, understandings and interpretations.

Job, in defending his integrity against the suppositions of his friends, declared, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust at a young woman." (Job 31:1) How better our communications would be if we were to make a covenant with our eyes to convey love and compassion in every look even as the good Samaritan did.

> "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him." (Luke 10:33)

What's in a Touch?

"*While he was speaking, I fainted and lay there with my face to the ground. But Gabriel roused me with a touch and helped me to my feet.*" Daniel 8:18

Yes, what's in a touch? This primary sense of being is foundational and essential to life itself. It was the touch of the Creator's hands that transformed clay into His likeness. It was through His lips that He imparted the breath of life, so giving purpose and meaning to human beingness. It is through touch that the first lessons of life are learnt and it remains our teacher throughout life.

Yes, what's in a touch? How often do we succumb to the tactile temptation to reach out and touch, take and taste the forbidden - the fruit, the person, the property, the life of another? Or do we instinctively and vicariously respond to the tactile experience of others as viewed in real life or as is pictured on page, screen or the imaginations of the mind?

What's in a touch? Yes, the touch of the Master who, "took the children in his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them" (Mark 10:16); who touched the blind and gave them sight, the lepers and made them clean. Yes, even those who reached out in faith and touched Him were healed (Mark 6:56).

Oh that we might experience the healing, comforting, reassuring and blessed touch of the Master. He brings renewal, revival, restoration and newness of life to those who reach out in faith and accept His touch. When we have received from the Lord, we will reach out in love to bring the Lord's healing touch to others. Yes, What's in our touch?

He touched me, Oh He touched me,
And oh the joy that floods my soul!
Something happened and now I know,
He touched me and made me whole.

Bill Gaither

The Message of Silence

> "*I said to myself, "I will watch what I do and not sin in what I say. I will hold my tongue when the ungodly are around me." But as I stood there in silence—not even speaking of good things—the turmoil within me grew worse. The more I thought about it, the hotter I got, igniting a fire of words*" Psalm 39:1-3

There is serene silence and there is seething silence. From our text for today, it seems that David's silence shifted from the serene mode into the seething mode. His thoughts and feelings got the better of him and he exploded.

There is the silence of submission, of surrender. Jeremiah writes, "So it is good to wait quietly for deliverance from the LORD. It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is still young. Let him sit alone and be silent, for God has disciplined him." (Lamentations 3:26-28 HCSB) In submission, argument ceases and congruence commences.

Leonardo da Vinci is quoted as saying, "Nothing strengthens authority so much as silence." This is true of Jesus when He stood before His accusers. The predictions of Isaiah were fulfilled in the courts of Jerusalem when Jesus "never said a word . . . did not open his mouth" in self defence (cf. Isaiah 53:7; Matthew 26:63). Rather, His silence only amplified the significance of His prayer uttered on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

Our Lord experienced the silence of the grave so that we may hear the shout of resurrection. Heaven will soon experience silence for half an hour while this earth experiences the victory call of the soon coming Christ. But before that tremendous event we need to listen to the Lord who says:-

> "Be still, and know that I am God! . . ." Psalm 46:10

In Quietness and Confidence

"*The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever*."

Isaiah 32:17 NIV

We ended yesterday's reflections with the call of the Lord to "Be still, and know that I am God!" God is righteous, His ways are righteous and as we commune with Him, listen to Him and respond positively and unquestionably to His guidance, we will enjoy the fruit and effect of that relationship, we will experience an ever-present sense of peace, quietness and assurance. Our creator and sustainer says, "I, the LORD, have called you to demonstrate my righteousness." (Isaiah 42:6)

Peace - "You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!" (Isaiah 26:3) Peace is the product of an abiding trust and commitment demonstrated by a desire to follow the Lord's example and bidding.

Quietness - Peter says, "You should clothe yourselves instead with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God." (1 Peter 3:4) While this was advice directed toward women, it is but an application of the honorable, peace-loving life that marks God's chosen people.

Confidence (assurance) - The beloved John says, "And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world." (1 John 4:17) And we live like Jesus when we confidently trust and obey His every direction.

"Dear friends, if we don't feel guilty, we can come to God with bold confidence." (1 John 3:21)

— Week Thirty-Six —

LET GOD GIVE ME PEACE

"The peace of Christ, the peace of Christ—money cannot buy it, brilliant talent cannot command it, intellect cannot secure it; it is the gift of God. . . . Of all things that are sought, cherished, and cultivated, there is nothing so valuable in the sight of God as a pure heart, a disposition imbued with thankfulness and peace." (Ellen G. White, Counsels on Health, p.403)

Step 8

Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9

Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Search For Peace

"*Turn away from evil and do good. Search for peace, and work to maintain it.*" 1 Peter 3:11

It seems that mankind has been searching for peace for a long time. During the past three and a half millennia there have been less than three-hundred years of peace, nations have made and broken more than eight-thousand peace treaties, and have entered into armed conflict over fourteen thousand times resulting in the death of more than three and a half billion people and the economic collapse of the nations at war. We look around the world today and we see that there is no peace. The nations are still creating weapons of mass destruction while searching for paths to peace through a forest of demands and blatant self-interest.

We long for peace, but in the world it is hard to find it. A story is told of an art competition conducted to find that perfect picture of peace. From the many scenes of peace depicted by the competing artists, two were selected. Second prize went to a scene depicting a tranquil lake reflecting the calming scene of contented sheep grazing it's lush grassy banks. But, in contrast, the winning painting depicted a raging waterfall on a stormy day. A spindly tree grew out precariously from the rocks, and in the fork of a branch close to the raging torrent was a bird's nest with the mother peacefully sitting on her eggs amidst the turmoil around her.

We live in a world in turmoil. We long for peace but where do we find it. Our text for today gives us some clues. We may not be able to avoid the storms of life but we can choose to do good, to still the troubled waters and to find that 'nest' of quiet rest beneath the protecting wings of our Saviour.

"Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7)

A Place of Peace

> "*My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.*"
>
> Isaiah 32:18

Home! What a beautiful word. Home is a place of belonging, safety and security; a place of rest, renewal and the dearest of relationships; a place of acceptance and acknowledgement, of comfort and congeniality, a place of peace - or so we would want it to be.

Home is not so much a building but a presence. Moses expresses this concept in the first verse of his only Psalm. He declares, "Lord, through all the generations you have been our home!" (Psalm 90:1) The Lord is our secure home and peaceful dwelling place. "He is [our] loving ally and [our] fortress, [our] tower of safety, [our] rescuer." (Psalm 144:2 fp) We find comfort in the words of Jesus when He assures us that "There is more than enough room in my Father's home." (John 14:2) While Jesus is talking of that heavenly home, it reminds us that He has always desired to be present with us. That was so in Eden, later at Sinai, in the Tabernacle of His presence, then, and to the fullest extent, when He graced us with His presence - when "the Word became human and made his home among us. . ." (John 1:14)

Yes, this was His mission, His purpose, His desire. He declares, "All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them." (John 14:23) in His final message to us through John, Jesus reveals His ultimate plan and purpose. In the new earth, in the Holy City, a loud voice from the throne declares, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people." (Revelation 21:3) But while we wait that glorious day, we can invite Him home now.

> "Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong." (Ephesians 3:17)

The Prince of Peace

"*For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*" Isaiah 9:6

What a glorious name! A Name among many titles and names given to this heaven sent babe. Prior to this pronouncement, a promise had been given, "Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14 HCSB) Yes, Immanuel - God is with us. This Holy One, born of a virgin and given to us as a gift of love, was to be named Jesus (the Lord saves) and would be called "the Son of the Highest" and "the Son of God" (Luke 1:31-35) in addition to the four appellations found in our text for today.

Wonderful Counselor - The temple guards said of Jesus, "We have never heard anyone speak like this!" (John 7:46) He was like no other teacher because "he taught with real authority" and "the crowds were amazed at his teaching" (Matthew 7:29,28)

Mighty God - Mighty enough to create and sustain all things, the giver of life, the Master of matter. He healed the sick, raised the dead, multiplied the loaves and calmed the stormy sea. "There is . . . no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

Everlasting Father - To Philip, Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!" (John 14:9) Earlier He had declared, "The Father and I are one." (10:30)

Prince of Peace - Michael our great Prince is Jesus our Saviour. He says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27)

"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you his peace at all times and in every situation. The Lord be with you all." (2 Thessalonians 3:16)

Pray For Peace

> "*I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.*" Romans 15:13

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an anti-Nazi dissident, theologian and Christian author was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1943 and was hanged two years later just before the collapse of .the Nazi regime. The story is told that one day, as he sat in his darkened prison cell, he heard the sobs of a fellow prisoner in the adjacent cell. Identifying himself as a pastor, Bonhoeffer offered to pray for this prisoner. The reply came back, "I don't believe in God." Undaunted, he began to pray, "Lord, it's dark in me; in you is day. I am alone, but you will stay. I am afraid; you never cease. I am at war; in you is peace."

Early the next day, a single shot shattered the stillness of the dawn. The same German guard who had heard Bonhoeffer's prayer reported, "I thought you might like to know. The boy from the next cell—he was very calm. It surprised everyone. He was executed this morning."

Tragic and fearful circumstances may encompass us but within the storm and turmoil of life we can find peace. The Lord sent a similar message through Jeremiah to the Jewish prisoners taken captive to Babylon. He wrote, "Work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7)

Pray for it! Work for it! That is the message the captives in Babylon were given. Daniel received a similar message when receiving his last vision. The angel messenger said:-

> "Don't be afraid," he said, "for you are very precious to God. Peace! Be encouraged! Be strong!"
>
> (Daniel 10:19)

The Peace Prize

The Gift of Peace

> "*I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.*" John 14:27

It seems incongruous that the inventor and manufacturer of dynamite and other explosives used in weapons of war should be remembered as the founder and funder of the Nobel Peace Prize. Since it's inception in 1901, the Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded almost every year with two significant breaks because of World Wars.

Men may chose to award peace prizes, make peace treaties and promote world peace, but how secure is that peace? "When people are saying, "Everything is peaceful and secure," then disaster will fall on them as suddenly as a pregnant woman's labor pains begin. And there will be no escape." (1 Thessalonians 5:3) That is the world we live in. Uncertainty reigns and the sound of conflict continues.

Our text for today reminds us that the world cannot give us peace. True, lasting peace comes as a gift from the God of love and peace. The Prince of Peace reassures us that "peace of mind and heart" is the gift He longs to give us. The world may be in turmoil, circumstances may threaten us, our lives may be in danger but the Lord says, "don't be troubled or afraid."

The Prince of Peace came to this earth and preached a message of peace and reconciliation. He healed the rift created by sin and took the burden and consequences of sin on himself so that we could be free to have fellowship with the Father. He who came not to condemn, took our condemnation to the cross. What a gift! What grace! What pardon and what peace!

> "You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!" (Isaiah 26:3)

Propagating Peace

"*And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.*"

James 3:18

Peacemakers propagate peace! That is their role, their chosen purpose and goal. They are agronomists of God's goodness and grace in a world where weeds of indifference, indolence and selfish intent choke the purpose and productivity of human society. As peacemakers, we will seek to plant God's recommended and certified seeds of peace:-

Gratitude and thankfulness - "Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness." (Colossians 2:7)

Compassion and mercy - "You must be compassionate (merciful), just as your Father is compassionate (merciful)." (Luke 6:36)

Kindness - Paul teaches us to "be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven [us]." (Ephesians 4:32)

Humility and Gentleness - Paul reminds us that we "should be gentle and show true humility to everyone." (Titus 3:2)

Patience - In addition to humility and gentleness, Paul says,"Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love." (Ephesians 4:2)

Orderliness - "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the meetings of God's holy people." (1 Corinthians 14:33)

"Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace." (Colossians 3:15)

Perpetual Peace

> "*And I will make a covenant of peace with them, an everlasting covenant. I will give them their land and increase their numbers, and I will put my Temple among them forever.*" Ezekiel 37:26

This promise of an everlasting covenant of peace comes toward the end of Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones that are given life again. The Lord wants to make His home among those who turn from the path of divisiveness and disloyalty to one of obedience, harmony and holiness.

Jesus enlarges this picture in the closing vision He gave to John. John sees a new heaven, a new earth and a new Jerusalem, the holy city - 'The City of Peace' (see Revelation 21:1-2). A voice from the throne declares, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. . . . He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." (V.3-4)

The God of Peace and the Prince of Peace are enthroned in the glorious City of Peace. From their throne flows a peaceful stream of living water. On its banks grows the tree of life providing a continuous supply of life sustaining fruit and medicinal leaves that heal cultural, racial and national differences. (cf. Revelation 22:1-4)

Those who find entry to that city have claimed victory in Jesus. They have cast off conflict and have accepted God's covenant of peace. They have been made holy in every way by the God of peace who preserves them blameless until the coming of the Lord. (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:23) They have listened and learned at the feet of the Master teacher and lived as peacemakers among men. Now they will enjoy the fruit of peacemaking in the kingdom of perpetual peace.

> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9 NIV)

— Week Thirty-Seven —

WALK WITH GOD

"The truly holy, who walk with God like Enoch of old, will not be boastful of their purity, but be courteous, humble, unselfish, free from spiritual pride and exaltation. Those who know most of God, and keep their eye fixed on the Author and Finisher of their faith will see nothing good or great in themselves. They will feel, after doing all in their power to be faithful, that they are yet unprofitable servants."

(Life Sketches of James White and Ellen G. White, 1888,p.211)

Step 10

Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

Enjoy The Company

"*Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all*!" Romans 12:16

A teacher once asked her students to list the names of each student in the class and write the nicest thing they could say about that person. At the end of class she collected the lists and at the weekend collated the comments for each student onto separate sheets. The next Monday she gave each student his or her own list. The smiles and whispered exclamations were enough and nothing more was said.

A few years later, many of the students and the teacher came together again at the funeral of a classmate killed at war. At the wake, the parents of the deceased showed the teacher two sheets of paper from his wallet. They were well worn, taped together but a precious reminder. Soon other ex-classmates revealed that they had likewise kept those lists as mementoes of their school friendships.

The unconditional acceptance of true friendship is to be valued. It brings harmony to relationships and peaceful living to all who humbly share the 'company of ordinary people'. But there are friends and 'friends'. A true friend, as the proverb says, "sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24), but there are 'fair-weather' friends who melt away when things get tough. It isn't how many friends one has that counts, but the quality and consistency of the friendship.

When Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, Jesus responded, "friend, why have you come?" (Matthew 26:50 NKJV) He who was "a friend of publicans and sinners" (Matthew 11:19 KJV) but was betrayed, denied and deserted by His closest companions, is the Jesus who experienced separation from the Father for us and is the Lord who says,

"I will never leave you nor forsake you."
(Hebrews 13:5 NKJV)

Take My Hand, Lord

> "*For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.*" Isaiah 41:13

Thomas was the featured soloist at a large revival meeting in St Louis. After a series of encores, he had barely sat down when he was handed a telegram from Chicago with the words, "YOUR WIFE JUST DIED". She had died while giving birth to their first child. Within two days the baby had also died. Overwhelmed with grief, he questioned God. Lost in grief, a friend took him to the quietness of a neighbourhood music school where he sat down at a piano, started playing a familiar melody and then the words from a broken heart came flowing from his lips:-

"Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light:
Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me home."

Thomas Dorsey's song echos the cry of the human heart for comfort, reassurance, direction and deliverance from the pain, turmoil and complications of life. That cry is heard by our loving Lord who is on a rescue mission to all who cry, "Precious Lord, take my hand". The reassuring response comes loud and clear, "Do not fear, I will help you". He assures us, "I will never leave you nor forsake you. I will personally go with you, . . . and I will give you rest - everything will be fine for you. Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (see Hebrews 13:5 NKJV; Exodus 33:14; Matthew 11:28)

> "Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:29)

Walking Humbly With God

> "*He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?*"
>
> Micah 6:8 NKJV

The Lord requires three things of us - Just conduct, merciful expressions of love, and humility in all we do and say as we submit under the yolk of the Lord's teaching, guidance and leading. Let us briefly consider the implications of living by these three principles.

Do justly - includes honesty in all our dealings coupled with respect for the life and property of others. It is living a life of fairness and forbearance, of social responsibility and rectitude - a practical application of God's law of love.

Love mercy - "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:36 NIV) There is no better model of mercy than the sacrificial life of Christ. Let it flow naturally from us who are the recipients of so much of God's love and grace.

Walk humbly - Essential to true humility is an appreciation and practice of justice and mercy. He who is "humble and gentle at heart", who "humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death" for us on the cross calls us to be yoked to Him so that we can learn from Him the way to true humility. (Philippians 2:8; Matthew 11:29)

In these three principles, so beautifully modelled by our Lord and Saviour, is encapsulated the essence of what it means to walk humbly with God. Amos raises the rhetorical question, "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3 NKJV) Let us agree to walk according to God's principles of justice, and practice His kind of mercy, then enjoy a harmonious, humble walk with Him into eternity.

> "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor." (James 4:10)

Walking With God Through the Valley

> "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*"
>
> Psalm 23:4 NKJV

The phrase "the shadow of death" is translated from a single Hebrew word that occurs eighteen times in the Bible, ten of them in the book of Job. It is uttered first by Job when he regrets ever being born. After his massive losses brought on by repeated satanic attacks and the misery of his boils, we can safely say that Job had every reason to be depressed.

Distasteful, untoward and tragic circumstances can vex our soul and cast deep shadows of despair across our path. Painful are the wounds of dislocated and damaged relationships. Heavy the burden of fiscal failure, poverty and debt. There are times when life can press in with a pall of problems that shut out the hope of a better day. But we have this assurance, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine." (Isaiah 9:2)

Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." (John 8:12) He who was "the Word", the creator of all things, first dispelled the darkness of the primal earth when He spoke light into existence on the first day of creation. So, when the deep darkness of disappointment, despair or depression engulf us, we have this promise, " the LORD will arise over [us], And His glory will be seen upon [us]." (Isaiah 60:2 NKJV) Yes, "God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all." (1 John 1:5)

> "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin."
>
> (1 John 1:7)

Safe in the Sanctuary

> "*Let me live forever in your sanctuary, safe beneath the shelter of your wings!*" Psalm 61:4

In the early days of the railroad in Texas, it was not uncommon for sparks from the old steam engines to start a grass fire. These fires wreaked havoc to surrounding farmland and homes. After one such fire a devastated farmer walked through the ashes of what had been his home and farm yard. He came upon the body of a dead hen with wings spread open. In frustration, he kicked the carcase and to his surprise several baby chicks ran out from under her wings. She had died protecting her brood of chickens.

It was just days before Passover. Jesus was in the Temple precincts talking to the multitude that thronged Him. He condemned the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees and foretold the persecution they would mete out to those who would take up the mantle of preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. It was after this that He cried out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me." (Matthew 23:37)

Sanctuary is available to us under the protective mantle of Christ's righteousness. Sanctuary from the consequences of our sin is ours as we hear His call to forsake our sinful ways and come under the shadow and healing of His wings (cf. Malachi 4:2). These same wings of protective care are the wings that rescue and bear us up when we fall (cf. Deuteronomy 32:11). It is beneath Christ's wings of mercy that we find forgiveness, receive redemption and are granted grace to live justly and righteously in this troubled world.

> "He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter you with his wings. His faithful promises are your armor and protection." (Psalm 91:4)

With a Grateful Heart

> "*I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure.*" Psalm 16:8-9 NIV

Dave Dravecky had reached the pinnacle of his career as a professional baseball pitcher for the San Francisco Giants when he was diagnosed with cancer in his pitching arm. Short of a miracle, the chance of him ever pitching again was zero. But, after a year, he had a celebrated and victorious comeback. Five days later, as he stood on the mound ready to pitch against the Cincinnati Reds, the words of Henry Smith's gospel praise song filled his thoughts:-

> "Give thanks with a grateful heart,
> Give thanks to the Holy One,
> Give thanks because He's given Jesus Christ, His Son.
> And now let the weak say, "I am strong"
> Let the poor say, "I am rich
> Because of what the Lord has done for us, Give thanks"

The umpire shouted, "play ball". He pitched. A 'crack' was heard and Dave crumbled to the ground in agony. His arm had split in two. The cancer had returned. Radical surgery removed his arm, shoulder blade, part of his collarbone and his baseball career. But years later, as a successful motivational speaker, he could still sing " Give Thanks".

Henry Smith had written this song when, after graduating from college, he had difficulty finding work. In addition, a degenerative condition was robbing him of his sight. Yet, in all these unfortunate circumstances, through their uncertainty, discouragement, loss and grief, both these men could still give thanks with a grateful heart to the Holy One who sent His Son to strengthen and enrich their lives.

> "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever." (Psalm 118:29)

Lead Me Home

"*With your unfailing love you lead the people you have redeemed. In your might, you guide them to your sacred home.*" Exodus 15:13

They had just escaped the Egyptian army. The mighty power of the Lord had been revealed when the waters of the red sea had parted and the Israelites had crossed on dry ground but the pursuing Egyptians perished when the waters returned and engulfed them. Such was this momentous experience that Moses and the children of Israel burst into a song of praise that is now known as the Song of Moses. It is from this song that we draw today's text.

We all come to a decisive 'Red Sea' experience when we step out in faith and respond to the Lord's leading; when we surrender self and lean wholly on the mighty arm of the Lord. It is the same Lord who parted the waters for Israel, who calmed the storm on Galilee and who said, "In my father's house are many rooms. . . I am going there to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2 NIV), and then said " I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." (V.3)

The words of Will L. Thompson's hymn echo the longing we all have for that coming home experience, that desire to belong:-

Lead me gently home, Father, Lead me gently home;
In life's darkest hours, Father,
When life's troubles come,
Keep my feet from wand'ring, Lest from Thee I roam,
Lest I fall upon the wayside,
Lead me gently home.

"I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them."" (Revelation 21:3)

— Week Thirty-eight —

GIVE GOD THE GLORY

"Through the Holy Spirit, God's word is a light as it becomes a transforming power in the life of the receiver. By implanting in their hearts the principles of His word, the Holy Spirit develops in men the attributes of God. The light of His glory - His character - is to shine forth in His followers. Thus they are to glorify God, to lighten the path to the bridegroom's home, to the city of God, to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

(Ellen G. White, Christ Object Lessons, p.414)

Step 11

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Glorify God the Creator

> "*You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased*."
>
> Revelation 4:11

As David opens the nineteenth Psalm he declares, "The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship." (Psalm 19:1) That was David's response as he looked into the heavens with the naked eye. What superlatives would flow from his lips if he were to see the glories and apparent endlessness of the universe as seen through the powerful telescopes of today?

In a later Psalm David ponders life itself and states, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." (139:14 NIV) But again, he says this with only naked eye awareness. What words would he have used if he had access to the powerful microscopes of today? What superlatives would he use if He understood that the microscopic DNA in a single human cell holds more information than a thousand-volumed encyclopaedia? More amazing is the fact that there are single cell organisms whose genome contain 100, even200 times as many base pairs of information as the human genome.

David new nothing of electric motors, but some single cell organisms have nano-motors that give them mobility. Then there is the wonder of human life that is totally dependent on the orderly functioning of trillions of individual cells that know their role and place to give us being. Such complexity baffles us and we, with David, declare, "You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power."

> "All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen." (1 Timothy 1:17)

Glorify God Through Our God Given Talents

> "*Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.*" 1 Peter 4:11

Jesus tells a parable about a wealthy man who entrusted the management of varying quantities of his wealth to three of his servants. One was given ten talents, another five and the third a single talent (See Matthew 25:14-30). Now a talent was a weight measure of about 33kg. Today, a gold talent would be worth about $1.25 million, and a silver talent around $16,500. Even if the talents were just silver, they still were of significant value.

We are all gifted with differing natural or acquired abilities. Peter gives us two examples, the gift of speaking (an intellectual gift) and the gift of helping others (a practical gift). When we use and develop our God given abilities responsibly and for the purpose of glorifying our Lord and Master, He will reward us with additional abilities and responsibilities as partners in His glorious kingdom.

But of all the talents we may be gifted with, they are nothing unless they are coupled with the supreme gift of God, His gift of love through His Son. Without the talent of love, the gift of speaking is only noise, the gift of helping achieves nothing. Love is the first and foremost of the fruits of the spirit. It is the gold talent that gives value to every other talent.

> "No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us." (1 John 4:12)

Glorify God in Our Actions

"*So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*" 1 Corinthians 10:31

The Chicago Tribune, March 24, 1936 carried the compelling story of two law students who had graduated from law school despite their physical handicaps. They first met on the stairs of the Chicargo-Kent College of Law. Armless Stanley Kaspryzak assisted blind Thomas Overton down the stairs. When the armless Stanley could not open a door, blind Thomas could. Thomas carried the books Stanley read them. The symbiotic relationship that developed from that chance meeting culminated in them both successfully graduating with Law degrees and then practising law together.

When we think about it, we are surrounded by myriad examples of essential symbiotic relationships within the natural world. The complex relationships within ecosystems; the fine balance in the interactions of bodies within the solar system and the universe that work together to support life on this planet. We look with awe and wonder and, with David, declare, "The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship." (Psalm 19:1)

We are also His craftsmanship created for a special role and a special relationship. A rulership role filled with responsibility and leadership, and a reflective relationship based on commitment, trust and love. As stewards of the One who created this living planet, as followers of the One who paid the price for our redemption and restoration, our every action aught to be to live lives that bring honor and glory to Him.

"So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image."

(2 Corinthians 3:18)

Glorify God with Our Lips

> "*Unseal my lips, O Lord, that my mouth may praise you*." Psalm 51:15

The fourteenth century discovery that certain dyes extracted from lichens could be used to test the pH of substances spawned the commonly used 'litmus test' for acidity or alkalinity. But now the term 'litmus test' is also used to describe a single indicator that would sway the decision for or against an action, person or thing. When it comes to selecting a political candidate, questions of honesty may be the litmus test - or could we say 'lipness' test - that voters would use in making their choice. What would be the 'lipness' test for assessing whether our conversation brings glory to God or not?

Isaiah was given an awesome vision in which he saw the Lord seated upon His glorious throne and attended by mighty seraphim. One cried to another, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" In the presence of such majesty, Isaiah cried, "Woe is me, . . I am a man of unclean lips, . . ." A seraphim brought a coal from the altar and touched Isaiah's lips and pronounced him clean (see Isaiah 6:1-7NKJV).

When we ask the Lord to "Take control of what [we] say, . . and [to] guard [our] lips" (see Psalm 141:3), the Lord unseals them and we are able to give praise to God through what we say. When, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus dwells in our hearts, our words will be filled with the grace of His presence, they will pass the 'lipness' test of sincerity and truth. We will even be able to stand confidently before those who would accuse us and the Holy Spirit will teach us what we should say (see Luke 12:11-12).

> "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

Glorify God in Song

> "*Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Romans 15:6

The human voice is more than a tool of communication. It is a versatile musical instrument designed by a musical God to make euphonic music. While the solo human voice is well able to sing songs of praise to the creator, it is in the polyphonic presentation of massed voices singing together in harmony and unity that God is magnified and glorified.

David gives us this invitation, "Oh, magnify the LORD with me, And let us exalt His name together." (Psalm 34:3 NKJV) David and Asaph, as talented musicians, are acknowledged as the ones responsible for establishing the practice of choral singing accompanied by musical instruments in the worship of God (see Nehemiah 12:46). Participation in hearty congregational, choral and ensemble singing and music making not only gives glory to God but draws us closer to our Saviour. It also plays a part in transforming our discordant lives, bringing us into a harmonious reflection of His glory.

In Revelation, John describes a magnificent heavenly scene where he sees and hears the myriads of angels who, with the four living beings, the twenty-four elders, and "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea", join their voices in singing, "Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever." (Revelation 5:8-13)

> "Then I will praise you with music on the harp, because you are faithful to your promises, O my God. I will sing praises to you with a lyre, O Holy One of Israel. . . . I will sing of your love and justice, LORD. I will praise you with songs of joy."
>
> (Compiled from Psalms 71:22;101:1;63:5)

Glorify God in Service

"*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*"
Matthew 5:16 NKJV

Just days before His crucifixion, when Jesus was teaching in the Temple, the scribes and Pharisees arraigned a woman before Him who had been caught in adultery. After dealing with her accusers, Jesus said to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 8:11 NKJV) We have all sinned, but as recipients of God's grace we are, likewise commissioned to 'go and sin no more'. This is a primary act of service.

Immediately after this encounter Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." (V.12) As followers of Christ we are to live the light of His life by being His hands in doing good, relieving suffering and healing the hurts and hangups of those around us (see Acts 10:38) This is our commission.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus told His followers that they were to be light-bearers to the world. Our good deeds are to shine forth in such a way that they bring glory to our heavenly Father. The light of God's love has shone upon us and it is reflected from our lives in blessings to others. Jesus commissions His followers to GO and make disciples, to share, indeed live, the news of "The Light of the World" (see Matthew 28:19-20). Peter learnt this and then taught it:-

> "Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen." (1 Peter 4:11)

Glory to God
Our Redeemer and King

"*All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen*" 1 Timothy 1:17

It is Paul who expresses these sublime words as he shares with Timothy, his young co-worker, the gratitude he has for God's undeserved saving grace. He had just declared the trustworthy truth that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" and then he makes the claim, "I am the worst of them all" (V.15). Paul acknowledged that his arrogant, insolent and violent nature, bolstered by ignorance and unbelief, had prompted his persecuting pursuit of Christ's followers. When his misplaced zeal was challenged on the Damascus road, he experienced the humbling generosity, the unmerited mercy and the marvellous saving grace of his Redeemer and Lord (V.13-14,16).

It is in recounting his experience that Paul is drawn to declare the glory of God. This theme has prompted Psalmists and songwriters to pen some of the most sublime words of praise we can give voice to. Why not sing His praises right now!

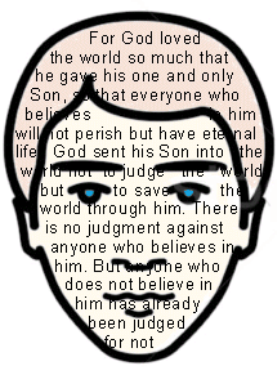
To God be the glory, great things He has done;
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,
Who yielded His life an atonement for sin,
And opened the life gate that all may go in.

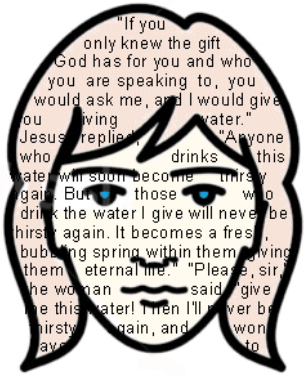
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
Let the earth hear His voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,
And give Him the glory, great things He has done.

Fanny Crosby (tune by William Howard Doane)

— Week Thirty-nine —

ON BEING A LIVING LETTER


For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world but to save the world through him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not


"If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."
Jesus replied, "Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life." "Please, sir," the woman said, "give me this water! Then I'll never be thirsty again, and won't have to

"God would have all men know, wherever His voice is heard, that the righteousness which Christ's obedience imparts to the believer is the righteousness that is described in the law spoken from Sinai. . . . [It describes] to us just what the Holy Spirit will print in living letters of light upon the fleshy tables of our hearts if they are but sensitised by living faith."

(Ellen G. White, The Everlasting Covenant, p.343)

Step 12

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others with like problems and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Bearing His Image

> "*And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.*" 1Corinthians 15:49 NKJV

In less than two hundred years photography has moved from the slow and crude forms developed in the early to mid 19th century to the instant photography of today's digital camera. The earliest record of the transference of an image from an object to a surface is found in the writings of the Chinese philosopher, Mozi, some four hundred years before Christ in what are called camera obscura projections.

Even as we are exposed to and bear the image of sinful man, Paul makes it clear that the bright rays of the Light of the world can pass through the pinhole portal of the smallest faith and project a true image of His glorious life on our hearts and etch into our being a true representation of His character. But if there is no hole, no aperture of openness, there is no access to the light, there is no way the image of Christ can be permanently reproduced in our lives. Conversely, if the aperture is wide open too many earthly images will blur, even obliterate the image of Christ.

Not all of us have the same sensitivity to the good news of Christ. Some may require a longer exposure time for a clear image to be reproduced, while others with higher sensitivity respond more readily. One thing is certain, we all need regular exposure to Christ so as to retain the clearest of images - such an image that is clearly visible to others and is powerful enough to awaken in those who are exposed to it, a desire to know more of the one who has transformed our lives and made us into loving and lovable exemplifiers of Christ's character of love.

> "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." (Romans 8:29)

Transcribed by the Holy Spirit

> "*Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you. This "letter" is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts*". 2 Corinthians 3:3

"Clearly!", Paul says. This is not a meaningless message, or ambiguous statement, or an illegible scribble. The focus is sharp, the message has meaning as the Holy Spirit etches into our being the gracious story of our redemption. This is the story of a transformed life that has taken on new meaning and is filled with a new and certain hope in Christ. The Holy Spirit imparts to the responsive heart the very nature of Christ.

The Holy Spirit works to rearrange our feelings and responses, our thoughts and intents, and brings meaning and purpose to our being. He cultivates and prunes till we bear abundant fruit - the fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23) The transcribing work of the Holy Spirit transforms us into a new creature. Paul, in the same letter as our key text, writes, "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The miracle of a transformed life presents a potent message of grace to those around us. Everyone can read it and in reading it they are drawn to appreciate the change, even benefit from the transformation and acknowledge the one who has wrought it. There is an invitation in the message of a changed life, that is a message from Christ that says, "come, follow me."

> "And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

A Message of Saving Grace

"*Afterward Jesus himself sent them out from east to west with the sacred and unfailing message of salvation that gives eternal life*."

Mark 16:8 (short ending to Mark NLT)

Some ancient Greek manuscripts have only this shortened version to end the Gospel of Mark. But with just a short few words is declared the greatest commission given to mankind, the commission to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, from east to west. The gospel is described as "the sacred and unfailing message of salvation that gives eternal life."

A sacred message - We are commissioned to share an undiluted, undefiled, unaltered and unadulterated message. A message that has the power to cleanse and change lives, that wipes away the burden of guilt and shame and brings hope and healing to all who suffer the consequences of sin.

An unfailing message - A message of God's covenant of unfailing love that reaches over the generations from creation to the present and extends into eternity (see Nehemiah 1:5). This unfailing covenantal love was fully expressed in Jesus (John 1:14,17) and we are commissioned to share that message.

A message of salvation - The Lord says, "Let all the world look to me for salvation! For I am God; there is no other." Then He says, "I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 45:22; 49:6)

Salvation's gift - God saves us by his grace when we believe. We cannot take credit for this; it is a gift from God, a gift we are called to share (see Ephesians 2:8).

"Show us your unfailing love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation." (Psalm 85:7)

Telling Our Story

> "*Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness. You are to tell the world what you have seen and what I will show you in the future*." Acts 26:16

The new procurator of Judea, Porcius Festus, had a problem. He had a prisoner of over two years whose case had not been resolved by Felix, the previous procurator. In attempting to bring the case to judgement, the prisoner, a Roman citizen, appealed his right to be heard by Caesar.

He sought the opinion of the visiting Jewish regional governor (tetrarch), king Agrippa II, and his sister, Bernice. The prisoner, Paul, was brought before them and Agrippa directed him to present his defense. He first presents a background of his strict upbringing as a zealous Pharisee who took it on himself to actively oppose and eradicate the Nazarene sect (ie. Christians). Then he describes his conversion, commission and mission to spread the good news of salvation to both Jew and Gentile. Festus shouted, "Paul, you're crazy!" but Agrippa said, "A little more, and your arguments would make me a Christian." (see V.24,28[fn])

We all have a story. It may not be as dramatic as Paul's story but it is just as valid. People around us see that story in our lives. For some the story may tell the outworking of God's amazing grace in their life. For others it is a quiet, consistent message of peace and Christlike presence. Whatever our story tells, let it be told with gratitude and humility, free from the embellishments of pride and proclivity. Let it be music to the ears of those who 'hear' it, who are drawn by it into an expression of praise to the Lord.

> "Sing praises to the LORD who reigns in [Zion]. Tell the world about his unforgettable deeds. . . Sing about the glory of his name! Tell the world how glorious he is." (Psalm 9:11; 66:2)

Christ's Love Written in Our Life

> "*So show them your love, and prove to all the churches that our boasting about you is justified*."
> 2 Corinthians 8:24

Off the storm swept coast of Scotland a ship was foundering. A lifeboat set out from shore into the raging waters to try and rescue the ship's crew. Those on shore watched and waited and eventually the lifeboat returned with all but one of the crew. They needed to go out again to rescue the remaining person but the oarsmen were exhausted. When volunteers to man the lifeboat to go and rescue the remaining man were called for, a young Scot stepped forward. His mother pleaded, "Don't go, John. Years ago your father was lost at sea. Last year your brother, William, went to sea and hasn't returned. You are the only one left and if you are lost what will I do? Please don't go!"

"Mother, I must go; a man is in peril. God will take care of us." He kissed her, jumped into the boat with the new volunteers and rowed out into the storm. They were gone a whole hour, but finally the dim outline of the lifeboat was seen approaching. Someone from the shore cried, "Have you found the man?" John shouted back, "Yes, we've saved him, and tell my mother it's brother William!" (William Edward Biederwolf, in Frozen Assets).

It is when we extend our love into the uncertainties of the unknown, when we are prepared to risk all to save another, that Christ's love written in the heart is evidenced. We may not be called to risk life or limb, but we are called to show sacrificial love as we turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, share one another's burdens and overcome evil with good. (cf. Matt. 5:39,41; Gal. 6:2; 1 Pet. 3:9; Rom. 12:17-21)

> "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." (John 15:13-14)

Copy and Paste

> "*And as the Israelites watched, Joshua copied onto the stones of the altar the instructions Moses had given them*." Joshua 8:32

Moses set forth principles that were to be followed when Israel would eventually want a king to rule over them. One specific task an incumbent king would be required to do to prepare himself for the role of king was to "write for himself a copy of this law in a book" (Deuteronomy17:18 NKJV). In fulfilling this task he would become familiar with the law of God and the regulations provided for healthy and happy civil life.

The children of Israel were also instructed to place the words and commands of the Lord in their hearts, to teach them to their children, to so surround themselves with reminders of them that they would live faithful and consistent lives (see Deuteronomy 6:6-9). Such indelible exposure would engrave the divine principles into the life and bring the thoughts and actions into harmony with the will of God.

In the classic book, 'The Desire of Ages', Ellen White suggests that "It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ. . . As we thus dwell upon His great sacrifice for us, our confidence in Him will be more constant, our love will be quickened, and we shall be more deeply imbued with His spirit. . . Beholding the beauty of His character, we shall be "changed into the same image from glory to glory." 2 Corinthians 3:18". (p.83)

It is as we "Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ" (Ephesians 5:2) that we become an example or pattern that others can emulate. As the character of Christ is copied and pasted into our lives, the message of salvation rings out to others through our transformed lives.

> "I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." (John 13:15)

A Message to Share

"*Sing to the LORD; praise his name. Each day proclaim the good news that he saves.*" Psalm 96:2

When Jesus was speaking with the apostles just before He was taken up into heaven, He assured them that the Holy Spirit would empower them to spread the Good News of His saving grace to everyone in all the world, to the very ends of the earth. He said, "you will be my witnesses." (see Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8)

We have a story to tell, a story of what the Lord has done in our lives. How He has rescued us from our own folly, forgiven us our failings and lifted us from the mire of our own bad habits and addictive behaviours and set us free from the burden of guilt and shame.

We have a story to tell, a story about a Saviour who walks with us, talks with us through His word and the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and leads us gently to higher ground. We can, with David, "Give thanks to the LORD and proclaim his greatness." We can "Let the whole world know what he has done" for us. "Yes, the LORD has done amazing things for us! What joy!" (see Psalms 105:1; 126:3)

Yes, with Isaiah, we can say, "See, God has come to save me. I will trust in him and not be afraid. The LORD GOD is my strength and my song; he has given me victory. With joy [we have drunk] deeply from the fountain of salvation!" (Isaiah 12:2-3) Jesus, the incarnate Creator, the righteous Redeemer came into this world as the Son of God and the Son of Man to offer himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. In accepting His grace, we can stand free in Him and daily "proclaim the good news that he saves."

> "Do not tremble; do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim my purposes for you long ago? You are my witnesses—is there any other God? No! There is no other Rock—not one! I, yes I, am the LORD, and there is no other Savior." (Isaiah 44:8; 43:11)

On Being A Living Letter

We are asked to be a letter,
A message from the Lord.
A living, vibrant letter,
A copy of His Word.

Words that convey comfort
To those who crave relief;
That render truth in loving ways
And nurture true belief.

A simple homily of hope
For a world so racked with pain;
A story of redemption
That brings healing in it's train.

A truly joyous letter,
A letter from above;
Abounding with assurance
And the certainty of God's love.

So, let us be that letter,
A transcript of His Word.
Let others gladly read us
And thereby know the Lord.

Leon N Powrie

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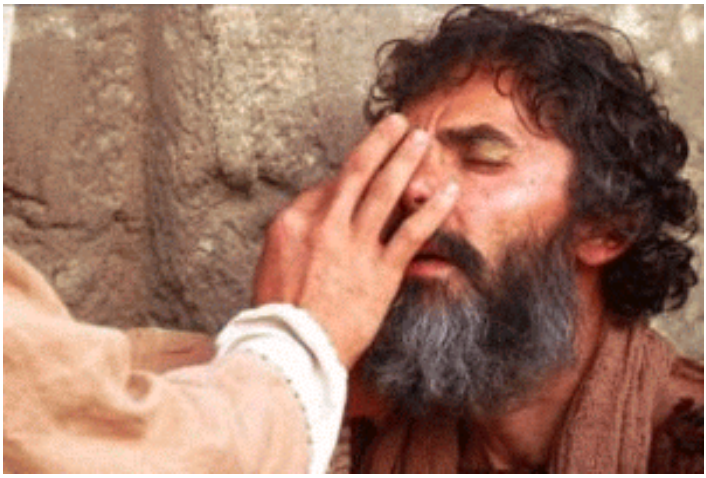
— Week Forty —

Open My Eyes



"We should sense our own condition, and not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. Humility will enable us to think of ourselves just as we are. It will open our eyes and understanding to a sense of our weakness and unworthiness before God, and, instead of taking glory to ourselves when God accomplishes something through us, cause us to give glory to him to whom it belongs. "

(Ellen G. White, General Conference Bulletin June 3, 1913, p. 241)

Step 1

We admitted we were powerless over our hurts, habits, addictions and compulsive behaviours, that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 4

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves.

The Gift of Sight

> "*Then Jesus told him, "I entered this world to render judgment—to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind."*
>
> John 9:39

Visual perception, the wonderful capacity to see, is dependent on a cascade of complex biochemical processes working within and through a succession of organized cellular structures located in the eyes, dedicated nerve pathways and the brain. There are mechanisms that control the flow and focus of light, there are specific cells that respond to the differing wavelengths and intensity of light and activate impulses that pass along nerve pathways to the optical areas of the brain where the moving picture of our environment is processed, perceived and integrated into our total awareness of our being within space, time, matter and life.

But in our text for today Jesus is talking to a man who had been blind from birth. Jesus had not only restored his physical sight but had given him spiritual insight that had confounded the synagogue leaders and pharisees. Some pharisees heard what Jesus had said and asked, "Are you saying we're blind?" Theirs was not a blindness born of ignorance but the blindness of misconception and misunderstanding. Jesus came to give spiritual sight to those born spiritually blind because of ignorance as well as those rendered blind by misconceptions, misunderstandings, misinterpretations and false teachings.

Can we not, like the Psalmist, ask the Lord to "Open [our] eyes so [we] can truly see the marvelous things in [His] law!" (Psalm 119:18 NET rendered in the 1st person). Some of us may need to remove the dark glasses of disbelief so that we can see our Lord face to face (see 1 Corinthians 13:12).

> "Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you."" (Luke 18:42)

Without Light We are Blind

> "*But when your eye is bad, your whole body is filled with darkness. And if the light you think you have is actually darkness, how deep that darkness is!*"
>
> Matthew 6:23

Blindness is understood to be a consequence of failed or faulty visual pathways. The WHO describes four levels of visual function ranging between normal vision through moderate to severe impairment, then blindness. But our text for today describes another form of blindness - the blindness experienced when there is an absence of light. There is no way we can see without light. Such darkness is often experienced by tourists visiting the depths of limestone caves when their guide switches off all the lights and they experience what it is like to be totally blind. What comfort and assurance is experienced when even just one candle power of light is switched on.

In the 1950's, Perry Como made Joseph Roach's song, 'One Little Candle'.popular. The song starts with these words:-

> It is better to light just one little candle,
> Than to stumble in the dark!

Then ends with this assurance:-

> And, if everyone lit just one little candle,
> What a bright world this would be!

In his first letter, the Apostle John equates love with light and hate with darkness. He points us to Jesus, the light of the world, who lived a life of love and asks us to love as He loved. But John says, "But anyone who hates another brother or sister is still living and walking in darkness." Such persons are "blinded by the darkness" of hate. (1 John 2:11 see also. Vs. 7-10). Conversely John says:-

> "Anyone who loves another brother or sister is living in the light and does not cause others to stumble."
>
> (1 John 2:10)

Colour-Blind Belief

> "*What sorrow for those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark, that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter. What sorrow for those who are wise in their own eyes and think themselves so clever*." Isaiah 5:21-22

Colour blindness is more common in men (8%) than in women (0.5%). The most common form, a deficiency in red-green perception, is an inherited condition passed from mother to son on the X chromosome. It only occurs in females when both parents carry the faulty X chromosome. In the realm of spiritual sight, faulty perceptions are transmitted from one generation to another until the sad situation develops where evil is seen as good and good is interpreted as bad.

This type of blindness is a common feature of Laodicea, the last of the seven churches of Revelation. The Lord declares, "you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." (Revelation 3:17) They think that they have it made, they need nothing but can't see that they are actually not seeing things as they really are.

Colour-blind thinking fails to grasp the real picture. Such thinking distorts and twists the facts to make them fit an inherited or favoured position. Essential truths can be lost in the inherited misperceptions passed down through generations of error. But the Lord offers us the eyesalve of spiritual discernment that He alone can give through His Word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is as we receive the clear light of the Gospel in Jesus that our tendency to colour-blindness will be dissipated. A clear path will open up before us and we will see our Lord in the beauty of His holiness.

> "Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it." (James 4:17)

Fixing Our Focus

> "*The man looked around. "Yes," he said, "I see people, but I can't see them very clearly. They look like trees walking around." Then Jesus placed his hands on the man's eyes again, and his eyes were opened. His sight was completely restored, and he could see everything clearly.*" Mark 8:24-25

This is the only instance where Jesus heals blindness in two stages. Could it be that this man had not only a perception problem but also a focal problem? It seems that, through this miracle, Jesus wanted to teach the disciples an important lesson regarding their own misperceptions of His mission and purpose. They had seen Him feed 5,000 near Bethsaida and another 4,000, probably in the Decapolis region. From here they went by boat to another region where the Pharisees came demanding further miraculous signs which Jesus refused to give them.

They took to the boat again and headed for the other side of the lake and the town of Bethsaida. "Watch out!", Jesus said, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod." The disciples started arguing about what Jesus meant. Seeing their confusion, He commented, "You have eyes—can't you see? You have ears—can't you hear?' Don't you remember anything at all?" He reminded them of the feeding of 5,000 and 4,000, then said,"Don't you understand yet?" (see Mark 8:13-21) It was after their arrival at Bethsaida that he healed the blind man in two stages.

Jesus was trying to fix the disciples' focus on His purpose and mission - to be the world's redemptive sacrifice. Still Peter couldn't see it so Jesus rebuked Him and added, "You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's." (V.33) Then He added:-

> "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

Twenty / Twenty Vision

> "*Jesus replied, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don't know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you?*" John 14:9

A person with normal visual acuity (20/20 vision) is said to be emmetropic. A near-sighted (myopic) person sees things that are close clearly but distant things are blurred. The far-sighted (hyperopic) person sees distant things clearly but near things are blurred. Clearly, to see emmetropically is the ideal but Philip failed the test. His vision of Jesus was blurred by a fog of preconceptions and connotations derived from distorted teachings, faulty interpretations of scripture and inaccurate Messianic expectations.

The ascetic 13th century Bishop of Chichester, Richard de Wyche, is the author a well-known prayer from which the words of the popular 1970's prayer song, "Day by Day", have been adapted.

Day by day, dear Lord, Of you three things I pray:
To see you more clearly,
Love you more dearly,
Follow you more nearly, day by day.

The song simply expresses the earnest desire of the heart for a daily emmetropic vison of Christ. With such visual acuity we are prompted to express genuine love for God and His creation, and then to respond to the needs of others even as Christ has so clearly modelled for us. It is as we see more clearly the wonder of His redemptive act of love that we respond with genuine love for God and our neighbour. In daily living this love we develop true 20/20 living.

> "Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other." (Romans 12:9-10)

More than 3D Vision

> "*"I am the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end," says the Lord God. "I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come—the Almighty One.""* Revelation 1:8

Binocular vision is dependant on two seeing eyes providing two overlapping views that are then processed by the visual areas of the brain. It is then that we 'see' a combined view that gives a greater and more accurate awareness of depth and three dimensional form. Monocular vision has to use motion, perspective and relative size to ascertain depth but does not see three dimensionally.

But there are additional factors that enhance our vision and add reality to what we see. As already mentioned, motion helps the monocularist perceive depth, and an essential element to motion is a continuum of vision through time. Our text for today presents a picture of 'the Almighty One' who has revealed himself to us through time - present, past and future. In the past we see God as the creator of being. In the present we see God as the sustainer of being. In the future we see God as the fulfillment of a promise to not only restore and renew, but to provide an eternal continuum with Him

There is a visual disability called monopsia where a person who has normal eyes does not see in 3D. Instead, they may see phantom images that distort reality. Likewise, in the spiritual realm we may have difficulty merging multiple perspectives into a coherent whole. But thanks be to God that as we focus on Him our perception becomes clearer and we can appreciate the multidimensional nature of God's love.

> "And may you have the power to understand . . . how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ . . . Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God." (Ephesians 3:18-19)

Visions of Glory

> "*So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.*" John 1:14

What a day that was! That day in Bethlehem when the 'Sun of Righteousness' (Malachi 4:2) came forth to tabernacle with humanity. We read His story, how He " increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52 NKJV); how, at His baptism, the Spirit of God, like a dove, settled on Him and the voice of God declared, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy." (Matthew 3:16-17) We are drawn from the darkness of this world to Him who is "the light of the world" and who then imparts to us His wonderful "light of life". (John 8:12; 1 Peter:2:9)

We pause at the cross and meditate on the words that escape the lips of the 'Sun of righteousness' before He slips into the darkness of death, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) In the sunset of His earthly ministry, with the storm-clouds of hate and derision engulfing Him, He beams forth the glorious rays of hope, love and assurance.

But that isn't the end. A new day dawns. The 'Sun of righteousness' rises again in everlasting glory. He has conquered the darkness of death, He draws us into the light of His everlasting love and commissions us to share that light in this world of darkness. The light of His everlasting love shines forth from His Word in multiple expressions of His glory and grace that lightens our path and guides our steps to His kingdom of glory.

> "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

— Week Forty-one —

Visions of God

"Self—the old disobedient nature—must be crucified, and Christ must take up His abode in the heart. Thus the human agent is born again, with a new nature. The newborn child of God begins to have some conception of what God is. To all intents and purposes, truth is truth to him. He has caught a glimpse of God's glory. A sense of his accountability to God quenches the unholy ambition that keeps upon the soul a galling yoke of guilt. The light in which he enters is softened and subdued, tempered to suit his condition. By daily beholding Jesus and striving to practise His virtues, his spiritual perceptions grow clearer and stronger."

(Ellen G. White, General Conference Bulletin June 3, 1913, p. 241)

Step 2

Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

The Visible Invisible

> "*For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God*." (Romans 1:20)

We 'see' with our senses. We are gifted with a rich array of sensory pathways through which we experience existence, presence and locative awareness of our local and broader environment as it is within the vastness of the universe. These receptors give us a sense of being within the ordered realm of matter, the sequential nature of time and the various dimensions of space. Putting it all together, and cognitively considering all that we 'see' with our senses, we really 'have no excuse for not knowing God'.

The whole of creation declares the awesomeness of God - 'his eternal power and divine nature'. We now understand something of the power of nuclear energy. Of the uranium in the A-bomb that destroyed the city of Hiroshima and killed 100,000 people, only an amount about the size of a pea is thought to have been converted to explosive energy. Just as we think of the enormous amounts of energy wrapped up in all created things throughout the vastness of the universe, we begin to understand a little of the immeasurable enormity of God's eternal and unending power.

Yet He who has all power and authority expresses Himself to us through His divine nature of love, mercy, justice and righteousness. As recipients of His immeasurable grace we join the chorus before His throne and sing:-

> "Great and marvelous are your works, O Lord God, the Almighty. Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous deeds have been revealed." (Revelation 15:3-4)

We are Invited

> "*And he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren't worthy of the honor. Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.'*" Matthew 22:8-9

This is an open invitation to all who are traversing the crossroads of life. In the parable from which our text for today is taken, the original invitations had been given to a select group of invitees. But their focus was on other things and they ignored the invitation, rejected and abused the messengers and in turn were rejected and punished by the king. The wedding feast was ready but there were no guests to celebrate with the king.

The king sent his servants out to the highways of life and invited, indeed urged, the travel weary, disadvantaged and disabled to come to the wedding banquet. The invitation is to all, irrespective of background, social standing or circumstances. The invitation is accompanied by convincing and persuasive arguments that break down the barriers of disbelief and doubt. The king has but one requirement, each guest must wear the wedding garment that he has graciously provided.

The wedding garment is a great equalizer for it has nothing to do with personal worth or status. It is a gift - a gift of saving grace to all who accept it - who gladly permit the Lord to strip away the filthy garments of their sinful life and cloth them in the robe of Christ's righteousness (cf. Zechariah 3:4) This is a seamless robe woven with the warp and woof of God's love and grace freely offered to all.

> " I am overwhelmed with joy in the LORD my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness. I am like a bridegroom in his wedding suit or a bride with her jewels." (Isaiah 61:10)

Just a Glimpse of Him

"*He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way.*" Luke 19:3-4

Although he held down a lucrative job as chief tax collector for the Jericho region, Zacchaeus was not the most popular man in town. Being short of stature didn't help either. He must have lived with feelings of inadequacy and frustration since childhood, feelings bolstered by ridicule, ribbing, and rejection. So the sycamore tree offered him an opportunity to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

This one glimpse opportunity for Zacchaeus turned into a knowing and loving encounter with Christ. His life of dubious dealings for gain took a flip as he experienced the unconditionality of Christ's love and acceptance. There was an immediate change in his perspective on life and his duty to God and man that prompted him to right the wrongs of the past and open his heart to the needs of others.

Like Zacchaeus, we need a glimpse of Jesus. Not a fleeting glimpse but a full on crowd stopping, life changing encounter with Christ. Yes, an encounter with Christ's unconditional love, His unfailing forgiveness and His passion to save. An encounter that works a miracle of saving grace in our lives. Let us acknowledge our need for Jesus as we sing:-

What the world needs is Jesus,
Just a glimpse of Him;
What the world needs is Jesus,
Just a glimpse of Him;
He will bring joy and gladness,
Take away sin and sadness;
What the world needs is Jesus,
Just a glimpse of Him.

Benjamin A Baur

Behold the Man

> "*Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!"*" John 19:5

In the Messianic prophecy penned by Isaiah it describes the indifference of the human heart toward the one who came to bear "the sins of us all." (Isaiah 53:6) It says, "There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. . . We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care." (Vs. 2-3)

Yes, "Behold the Man" who "had done no wrong and had never deceived anyone", (V.9) but "was beaten so we could be whole. [Who] was whipped so we could be healed." (V.5) Behold the one who took our sin and rebellion upon himself and became our sin offering (V.10), who "was led like a lamb to the slaughter. . . [but] did not open his mouth" (V.7).

Yes, "Behold the Man" standing before the mob outside the praetorium with a purple robe draped over His beaten body and a crown of thorns upon His head. Hear the leading priests and Temple guards shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Yes, crucify the one who had been declared faultless by Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea.

Yes, "Behold the Man!" who suffered for our sins and carried them to the cross. Do we turn our backs on Him and carelessly look the other way? (V.3) Do we hear His words, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

Yes, "Behold the risen and ascended Man", the chief cornerstone who builds us up into the Temple of the LORD.

> "Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, And He shall build the temple of the LORD;" (Zechariah 6:12)

Look Upon Jesus

> "*And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself*." John 12:32

It was only five days before the Passover celebration. Jesus had entered Jerusalem riding a young donkey. The crowds were full of expectation. Many had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, and this news had excited the expectations of the crowd. Then they heard a voice from heaven respond to Jesus prayer, "Father, bring glory to your name." (V.28)

Jesus had alluded to His coming crucifixion earlier in His ministry when He talked with Nicodemus. He said, "as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life." (John 3:14-15) We have all been bitten by the serpent, Satan. The venom of his temptations has condemned us to death but Jesus, the light of the world, has come with healing for all who will look to Him in faith.

Yes, when we look upon Jesus, we see the one who "was pierced for our rebellion, [*and*] crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed." (Isaiah 53:5) But Isaiah paints a disturbing picture of our human responses to the messianic Servant who was "despised and rejected" by men. He admits that "We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care." (V.3) We wanted to do our own thing, to follow our own paths little realizing that "the LORD [had] laid on him the sins of us all." (V.6) But "the LORD says, "Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts."" (Joel 2:12). Yes, look upon Jesus and live.

> ""But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture." (Malachi 4:2)

Enthroned in Glory

> "*But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand.*"
>
> Hebrews 10:12

Within a period of some forty days after His resurrection Jesus appeared a number of times to His disciples and followers to clear away their doubts and uncertainties and to commission them for His service. Finally, "When the Lord Jesus had finished talking with them, he was taken up into heaven and sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand." (Mark 16:19) Peter expresses it this way, " Now Christ has gone to heaven. He is seated in the place of honor next to God, and all the angels and authorities and powers accept his authority." (1 Peter 3:22)

The author of Hebrews, in speaking of Jesus the Son of God, says, "The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God . ." (Hebrews 1:3) Jesus left the glory of heaven to tabernacle with humanity, to reveal to mankind the glory of God as expressed in His character of love, and then to impart it to those who choose to be one with Him. The night of His betrayal Jesus prayed, "I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one." (John 17:22 cf.V.24) It was on the cross that the fulness of God's glorious love for mankind was revealed.

But He who ascended to glory has promised to return in glory to receive those who reflect His glory. Paul describes how the Lord prepares us for this grand event. He says, "The Lord . . . makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

> "Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand."
>
> (Colossians 3:1)

Living in the Light

> "*But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin*"
>
> 1 John 1:7

To understand what it means to live in the light we need to understand how John, the author of our text for today, understands it. First, he declares, "God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all." (V.5) Later he makes it clear that "God is love" and then he adds, "and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them." (1 John 4:16) This is a way of life in which we have fellowship with God and fellowship with each other.

John warns us, "If anyone claims, "I am living in the light," but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is still living in darkness." Then he adds, "Anyone who loves another brother or sister is living in the light and does not cause others to stumble." (1John 2:9-10) This is living in fellowship where, as community, we are actively involved in an interdependent cooperative relationship built on the foundation established by Jesus and held together by the bonds of our common faith and purpose.

This is what John means when he says, "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. . . And in this fellowship we enjoy the eternal life he promised us." (1 John 1:3; 2:25) This is family fellowship where we walk in safety and unity with our Everlasting Father, our Prince of Peace and all those who "walk in the light of the LORD." (Isaiah 2:5)

> "And now, dear children, remain in fellowship with Christ so that when he returns, you will be full of courage and not shrink back from him in shame."
>
> (1 John 2:28)

— Week Forty-two —

Dimensions of Glory

“Every ray of light shed upon others will be reflected upon our own hearts. Every kind and sympathizing word spoken to the sorrowful, every act to relieve the oppressed, and every gift to supply the necessities of our fellow beings, given or done with an eye to God's glory, will result in blessings to the giver. Those who are thus working are obeying a law of heaven, and will receive the approval of God.”

(Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 4 p.56)

Step 11

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

The Glory of Creation

> "*For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.*" Romans 1:20

The evidence is there in 'earth and sky'. God's glory and greatness, His 'eternal power and divine nature' are seen in all things great and small, visible and invisible. Creation speaks. "The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship." (Psalm 19:1) The beauty of forest and flower, the wonder of bird and beast, the power of wind, fire and flowing water, all sing of the mighty power of God.

Isaiah says, "Look up into the heavens." and then asks the rhetorical question, "Who created all the stars?" (Isaiah 40:26) With the increasing power of telescopes, astronomers estimate that there is some 10 trillion galaxies in the universe and each galaxy could have, on average, about 100 billion stars giving us an incomprehensibly large total number of light and energy emitting stellar bodies. And when we include all the other associated bodies such as planets and moons, we stand in awe at the "great power and incomparable strength" (ibid) of the LORD, "the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth." (V.28)

Just think about this living planet. It spins at an equatorial speed of about 1670 km/h (1037 mph) and orbits the sun at the incredible speed of 110,000 km/h (67,000 mph). Yet it is the home for myriads of living things, all oblivious to the dynamics of motion as they move through space. We look with wonder at the artistry of God in all His creation. Despite the eco-damage inflicted on this planet by sinful man, all creation still speaks of God's glory.

> "For you, O LORD, are supreme over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods." (Psalm 97:9)

Created for God's Glory

> "*When I observe Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You set in place, what is man that You remember him, the son of man that You look after him? You made him little less than God* [Heb. Elohim] *and crowned him with glory and honor*." Psalm 8:3-5 HCSB

Psalm eight is a praise song to the majesty and glory of our Creator God. It begins and ends with the words, "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (V.1,9 ESV) This is a fundamental fact that even young children can grasp, indeed did grasp in Jesus day. On the day of Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem when He purged the Temple court of racketeers and began healing people, the children were heard shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The chief priests and scribes remonstrated with Jesus about this and Jesus replied by quoting from the second verse of this Psalm, "'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?" (Matthew 21:16 ESV)

We were created with the capacity to appreciate and respond to the evidences of God's mindfulness and care. Consider all the potential that is wrapped up in a little babe created with an imprint of God's image, created to fulfill a position of responsibility, glory and honor as custodians of every created thing on this earth (cf. Psalm 8:6-8). We were created with the potential, privilege and prerogative to praise and give glory and honour to our Wonderful Creator. He is our consistent Counselor, the omnipotent Mighty God, the Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace who has, through His incarnation, death and resurrection, earned the right to our worship and praise. (cf. Isaiah 9:6)

> "Let [us] praise the name of the LORD, For his name alone is exalted . . ." (Psalm 148:13 NKJV)

The Wonder of it All

> "*Yes, you have been with me from birth; from my mother's womb you have cared for me. No wonder I am always praising you! . . . That is why I can never stop praising you; I declare your glory all day long.*"
>
> Psalm 71:6,8

We start life as a single cell, a union of the largest and smallest of human cells. As the product of conception, we start with a unique, individualized version of the human blueprint. This is even true of identical twins. Through the wonder of cell division, differentiation and multiplication we develop into a viable embryo attached to a nutritional source - our mother's womb. The embryonic stage ends as we take on the shape and form of a fetus with functioning neural pathways, circulatory system, digestive tract, sensory and skeletal structures, and an identifiably human form.

Touch is our first sensory experience, and, through our life, remains an essential part of our being, bonding and belonging. As we develop, we start to 'hear' sound through vibrations and then through the auditory pathways that initiate identifiable patterns of appreciation, caring, communication, and, unfortunately, conflict.

At the end of the gestational period we are thrust forth from the seclusion of the womb into a widening world of sensory experience, growth, learning and development that brings hoped for purpose and meaning to what we call life. Even though we may experience moments, even periods of pain, sorrow and regret as a result of the mistakes, misjudgements and misfortune of self and others, we can trust in the care of our Creator who reminds us, "I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Joshua 1:5 NIV).

> "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."
>
> (Psalm 139:14)

The Splendor of His Name

"*Honor the LORD for the glory of his name. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.*" Psalm 29:2

Gabriel, the angel who stands in the very presence of God, brought to both Mary and Joseph a message from the courts of heaven. Mary would conceive and give birth to a boy to whom they were instructed to give the name 'Jesus', which means 'The LORD saves'. This holy babe would be acknowledged as 'the Son of God', as 'Emmanuel' - God with us. Over seven hundred years earlier, Isaiah had prophesied many things about this child and that He would be known by four powerful appellations, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, [and] Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)

Yes, Jesus is the name that rises above all names in honour, glory and Majesty. Jesus is more than worthy of our adoration, worship and praise. Honoured by the heavenly hosts, exalted by the heavenly Father, and adored by His earthly family. His name is on our lips in prayer and in song, in life's joys and sorrows, and may even be the last name uttered before our passing. The splendor of that name is well expressed in Bill and Gloria Gaither's song, 'There's Something About That Name'.

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, there's just something about that name.
Master, Savior, Jesus, like the fragrance after the rain.
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, let all heaven and earth proclaim!
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away,
But there's something about that name."

"Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:9-11)

The Glory of God's Immeasurable Love

> "*Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.*"
>
> Ephesians 3:17-18

Our minds struggle to comprehend the words Jesus spoke to Nicodemus some two thousand years ago when He said, "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son . . ." (John 3:16) The Word made flesh came to bear the guilt and shame of all humanity and took it to the cross so that we can experience God's immeasurable love throughout eternity.

This act of love prompted Fanny Crosby to pen these words:-

> To God be the glory, great things He hath done;
> So loved He the world that He gave us His Son, . . .

It was because of His great love for mankind that Jesus personally confronted Saul, that zealous persecutor of the early church, on the road to Damascus. Later, as Paul, he wrote, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." (Galatians 6:14 KJV) This act of submission by the Divine Son of God is the greatest act of love evidenced not only to mankind but to the whole of God's creation. Jesus himself said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." (John 15:13 NKJV) Grasp it! Accept it! Live in it's glory!

> "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39 ESV)

Do All for the Glory of God

"*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*" 1 Corinthians 10:31

In the middle of the seventeenth century representatives of the Scottish and English churches formulated a set of teachings in question and answer form, the first of which reads, "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." The second teaching states that the Bible teaches us how we may achieve this end. Our text for today points us to a life where every aspect of our being and doing is governed by one purpose, "do it all for the glory of God". Such should be our purpose.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul elaborates further on this principle by writing, "Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God." (Romans 6:13)

Glorify God by Following the Way - He who is, "the way the truth and the life" says of Abraham, "I have singled him out so that he will direct his sons and their families to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just." (John 14:6; Genesis 18:19) That is our purpose.

Make Glorifying God our daily Goal - "Let love be [our] highest goal!" (1 Corinthians 14:1) Paul then adds, "Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands." (1 Thessalonians 4:11)

Worship the God of Glory - The angel messenger for today says, "Fear God and give Him glory, . . Worship the Maker of heaven and earth . . ." (Revelation 14:7 HCSB) That is our privilege and purpose.

"Honor the LORD for the glory of his name. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness."
(Psalm 29:2)

Eternal Glory

> "*In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation. All power to him forever! Amen.*"
>
> 1 Peter 5:10-11

Glory belongs to God. He is and ever will be glorious. He is the fountain and "Father of glory." (Ephesians 1:17 KJV) God's glory was present in the cloud that rested on Mt Sinai and was seen by Israel as a "consuming fire". (see Exodus 24:17) His shekinah glory was present in the cloud that filled the tabernacle built by Moses. Such was the intensity of the glory enshrouded in the cloud that when Moses came from communing with God his face shone with such glory that he had to veil his face.

But then He, who spoke everything into existence, took on our human form to share His glory with us. He "made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son." (John 1:14). His glory was present in His unfailing love and faithfulness. It is as we experience and then share His unfailing love and faithfulness with others that we begin to participate (like Moses) in the shared glory of God. Paul expresses it this way, "So I am willing to endure anything if it will bring salvation and eternal glory in Christ Jesus to those God has chosen." (2 Timothy 2:10)

It is God's glorious purpose to restore, reshape and build us up on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ, the rock of our salvation, the guarantor of a share in His eternal glory.

> "All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen." (! Timothy 1:17)

— Week Forty-three —

On Being Loving and Lovable

"There is an eloquence far more powerful than the eloquence of words in the quiet, consistent life of a pure, true Christian. What a man is has more influence than what he says.

The badge of Christianity is not an outward sign, not the wearing of a cross or a crown, but it is that which reveals the union of man with God. By the power of His grace manifested in the transformation of character the world is to be convinced that God has sent His Son as its Redeemer. No other influence that can surround the human soul has such power as the influence of an unselfish life. The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian." (Ellen G. White, Help in Daily Living, p.8)

Steps 4, 6 and 7

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

God is Love

"*We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.*" 1 John 4:16

The question is, 'Do we really know how much God loves us?' Do we have the capacity to fully comprehend it, to appreciate it, to trust it, to experience the inexhaustible nature of God's love? What does it take for us to 'live in love' and for 'love' to live in us? These are questions worthy of our contemplation until our lives are lived daily and moment by moment in and as an expression of godly love.

Abraham went on a long journey to learn that lesson. He made mistakes along the way until he came to trust the God who is love. The greatest test of that relationship of faith was when he and his 'only son', Isaac, climbed Mount Moriah together. Abraham had learnt to trust implicitly in the God who had promised him that his descendants would be as the sand of the sea through that one child who he had now been asked to sacrifice. Isaac was spared and both father and son learnt the lesson that God would and does provide.

The prolific twentieth century gospel song writer, John W. Peterson expresses this truth in the words of his well-known song, 'God is Love' (©1957 by Singspiration, Inc.):-

God is love! O truth transcendent,
Message of His Word resplendent,
God is love! Its pages all proclaim;
Christ the Lord, the great Creator--
Heav'n adored, became our Saviour,
Born on earth to bear our sin and shame. . . .
O what loss! all earth should note it,
At the cross in blood He wrote it;
God is love! O hear it, God is love!

"How precious is your unfailing love, O God!"
(Psalm 37:7)

Created to Love

> "*Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God.*" 1 John 4:7

God is love, and mankind was created in the image of God with the capacity to experience and express love. He gave to man the key to love and that key was choice. Without choice it is impossible to love and without another there is no choice. So when God created mankind he created them in a unique way so that they could appreciate and respond to the love of each other.

In his book, 'Your Life Isn't for You: A Selfish Person's Guide to Being Selfless', Seth Adam Smith writes, "Real love isn't just a euphoric, spontaneous feeling—it's a deliberate choice—a plan to love each other for better and worse, for richer and poorer, in sickness and in health." This is love that chooses to be responsive and responsible in the formation of relationships with others and with God.

Love is a principle of being exemplified in the life of the Son of God. He chose to step down from glory to be one with His fallen creation. He took the role of a servant and humbled himself even further taking the blame and shame of our selfishness and sin to the cross so that we might respond willingly and gratefully to such selfless love and choose to enter selflessly and trustingly into an active relationship with Him. Such a relationship leads us to a path of sacrificial loving service to God, humanity and to all creation.

Yes, we were created to love God and love others through active service and purposeful being. God is love and His love never fails. It has eternal value and consequences for those who are perfected by His divine presence in them.

> "No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us." (1 John 4:12)

Expressions of Love

> "*But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him.*" 1 John 2:5

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century poet, hymn-writer and novelist, William Arthur Dunkerley, writing under the pseudonym of John Oxenham, penned these pithy words:-

> Love ever gives. Forgives, outlives, And ever stands
> With open hands. And while it lives, It gives, For this
> is love's prerogative– To give, and give, and give.

Such was the nature and reputation of Tabitha (Dorcas), an active believer in Jesus who lived in Joppa. She was known for "always doing kind things for others and helping the poor." (Acts 9:36) She had made clothing for the widows of the city and it was these widows who grieved the most when she fell ill and died. She was loved because she had loved tirelessly and generously. But her Lord responded to the prayer of Peter and raised her to newness of life and service.

There were two rich men who interacted with Jesus in contrasting ways. The first, the rich young ruler, was challenged by Jesus to sell his possessions so as to help the poor. This he was not prepared to do. The other rich man, Zacchaeus, responded differently. Without Jesus even suggesting it, he responded to love's prerogative and committed himself to a path of restitution, generosity and service. (See Matthew 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-22; 19:1-10)

The words of John Oxenham's Hymn ring true:-

> In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north, but **one great fellowship of love** throughout the whole wide earth.
>
> "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:35 NIV)

The Unselfish Life

> "*Then he said to the crowd, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me."*" Luke 9:23

A dog-eat-dog mentality had developed in the second world war Japanese prisoner of war camp. At least that was the case until big Angus McGillivray died. He died of starvation because he had given his meagerly rations to his sick buddy. News of his sacrifice spread throughout the camp and prompted a renaissance of selflessness. The inmates formed an orchestra of homemade instruments, a church, a 'university', 'library' and 'hospital'. The spirit of selflessness grew and meant survival for many of these men. (from Ernest Gordon's, "Miracle on the River Kwai")

This story brings to mind the words of Jesus, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) And we know what Jesus was intimating when He made this statement. His selfless act on calvary so that we could be saved from our selfishness marks the pinnacle of a selfless life of loving service.

Paul paints a picture of that life in the second chapter of Philippians where he admonishes us to emulate the humility of Christ. He says, "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. . . . You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had." (Vs. 3,5) James takes up somewhat the same theme when he writes, " jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic." (James 3:15) Then James adds:-

> "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness." (James 3:17-18)

Love That Listens

> "*Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David.*" Isaiah 55:3

"Come to me", the Lord says, "with ears wide open", with the accumulated wax of misconceptions and misinterpretations removed and the testy tinnitus of stinking thinking and the constant chatter of self talk turned off. "Come", He says, "listen, and you will find life".

Often, when Jesus had an important lesson to teach, He would say, "Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!" (Matthew 11:15) This is particularly true in His messages to the seven churches recorded in the book of Revelation (Chs.2,3). Each church is called to listen, learn and understand not only the messages directed toward them, but to each of the seven messages. But there is one more significant warning to listen and understand in this book and it is in the middle of a prophecy about a sea beast and a land beast that ends with a call to understand and calculate (see Ch.13:9,18).

Listen! Our blessed Lord offers us an everlasting covenant of love. Love that binds us in a living relationship with our Creator King, Truth-filled Teacher, Reliable Redeemer and Faithful Friend. To the last of the Seven Churches Jesus says, "Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends." We are His friends when we do what He commands. And this is His command: "Love each other." (cf. John 15:14,17) Then He extends it even further:-

> "But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you."
> (Luke 6:27-28)

The Touch of Love

> "*Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!*"
>
> Mark 1:41

This was Jesus practice. His was a healing touch, a touch of acceptance, of assurance, of restoration, of comfort. His were the hands that formed man from the dust of the ground. His were the lips that breathed life into that lifeless form. He is the one who took of Adam's being and created a companion "comparable to him." (see Genesis 2:7,18-23)

Yet these divine hands took on human form, grew in the embrace of the womb and was delivered into the nurturing arms of Mary. He experienced life in a sin-scarred world, yet without sin. He embraced His mission of love with a passion for people. His hands reached out in multiple healings, they broke bread to feed multitudes, took the hand of a dead damsel and restored her alive to her grieving but believing family, and rested in reassuring blessing on little children.

Yes, His were the hands that were bound like a common criminal, that endured searing pain when they were pierced for our iniquity, that then fell limp when His lifeless form was taken from the cross and laid in Joseph's tomb. These were the hands that death could not hold but were raised in resurrection victory early Sunday morn and later that evening were presented to His disciples as evidence of His risen reality.

This same Jesus asks us to reach out to Him with open heart and hand. He invites us, who all too often doubt, to stretch out our hands of faith and touch and feel those scarred hands and experience the tactile evidence of His love.

> "Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!"
>
> (John 20:27)

Love Perfected

> "*And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.*" 1 John 4:17

A number of times during His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used a method of presentation that started with a 'You have heard' statement followed by a 'But I tell you' teaching. After using several of these patterns as recorded in Matthew 5, He ties off the teachings with a concluding 'therefore' statement that comes as a challenge to every student of truth. He declares, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (V.48 NIV)

The immediate context of this statement begins with the 'You have heard' statement, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy' (V.43 NIV) followed by the 'But I tell you' teaching, 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (V.44 NIV), and the rationale for such a teaching is the example of our heavenly Father who showers blessings on both the 'evil and the good' (V.45 NIV).

Love is perfected when we forsake the path of anger, resist the demands of lust, honor our relational commitments, watch our words, go the second mile in generosity, and love even our enemies. These are the teachings of the one who asks us to "love each other, because he loved us first." (1John 4:19) "We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect." (V.16,17FP)

> "Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love." (1John 4:18)

— Week Forty-four —

Genuine Joy

"Without the cross, man could have no union with the Father. On it depends our every hope. From it shines the light of the Saviour's love, and when at the foot of the cross the sinner looks up to the One who died to save him, he may rejoice with fullness of joy, for his sins are pardoned. Kneeling in faith at the cross, he has reached the highest place to which man can attain." (Ellen G. White, Acts of the Apostles, p.209)

Steps 4, 6 and 7

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Joyful News

> "*The women ran quickly from the tomb. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy, and they rushed to give the disciples the angel's message.*"
>
> Matthew 28:8

Emotions were intrinsically on edge as the women went to the tomb early that Sunday morning. Their joy at Christ's triumphal entry to Jerusalem a week earlier had been obliterated completely by their grief at His condemnation, cruel crucifixion and hasty committal to a tomb the previous Friday. There had been another earthquake earlier that morning and when they reached the tomb they found it empty. Emotions went into free-fall as their grief turned to perplexity and bewilderment then fear at their encounter with the heavenly messenger who told them, "He is not hear; for He is risen".

Now their feelings of fear were juxtapositioned against an overwhelming sense of joy. Adrenalin was running freely through their veins as they hurried to share their experience with the disciples and to give them the earth shattering news of a risen Lord. This is the one piece of news that tops even the joyful news of the Messiah's birth some thirty-three years earlier. Upon this one piece of news hangs all our hope and assurance. As Paul puts it, "If Christ has not been raised, then [our] faith is useless." (cf. Corinthians 15:17)

It is this joyful news that prompted Priscilla J. Owens to write:-

We have heard the joyful sound: Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
Spread the gladness all around: Jesus saves! Jesus saves!
Bear the news to every land,
climb the steeps and cross the waves;
Onward! 'tis our Lord's command: Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

> "Sing to the LORD; praise his name. Each day proclaim the good news that he saves." (Psalm 96:2)

The Gift of Joy

> "*And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*" Isaiah 35:10

The expression, "a king's ransom", relates to the experience of the 12th century English king, Richard the Lionheart. On his way home from a Holy Land Crusade, Richard was captured in Austria by the Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold V, who demanded an enormous ransom. The people of England rallied and raised the huge amount demanded and bought their beloved king's release.

But think of the price paid for our ransom. He who shared the divine prerogative, who spoke all things into existence, came intentionally to seek and save the lost. He came to give his life as the ransom price for our redemption. In this mighty act of grace He releases us from the shackles of guilt, shame and despair (the products of our imperfect past) and offers us a place and a future as fellow siblings in His divine family.

Oh, what gladness! Oh what joy! Habakkuk rightly says, "I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!" (Hab.3:18) Such joy flows from us in melodic songs of praise. Take, for instance, Stanton Gavitt's 1936 chorus which proclaims, "I'm so happy and here's the reason why - Jesus took my burdens all away." Or Seth and Bessie Sykes song of gratitude from the same era, "Thank you, Lord, for saving my soul / Thank you, Lord, for making me whole; / Thank you, Lord, for giving to me / Thy great salvation so rich and free." The gift of everlasting joy is ours to receive, to experience, to sing about and, then, to share.

> "With joy you will drink deeply from the fountain of salvation! In that wonderful day you will sing: "Thank the LORD!"" (Isaiah 12:3-4FP)

Songs of Joy

"*David also ordered the Levite leaders to appoint a choir of Levites who were singers and musicians to sing joyful songs to the accompaniment of harps, lyres, and cymbals.*" 1 Chronicles 15:16

We have already recalled three songs that reflect the joy of our salvation, but there are many more that flow from the lips of eternal gratitude. Think of the Songs of rejoicing led by Moses and Miriam after the children of Israel had miraculously escaped through the parted waters of the Red Sea, then saw the Egyptian army perish as the waters returned and engulfed it. That was a joyful song of deliverance (see Exodus 15).

The greatest of the Biblical song writers was David who is known to have contributed seventy-five of the one-hundred and eighty-five songs found in the Bible. He writes, "Come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation." (Psalm 95:1) In another Psalm David begins with the reason to sing, "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight!", and ends with "So rejoice in the LORD and be glad, all you who obey him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!"

One of the most memorable songs of joy was written in 1907 by Henry van Dyke and set them to the 'Ode to Joy' melody drawn from Beethoven's ninth and final symphony by Edward Hodges.

"Joyful, joyful, we adore You, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before You,
Op'ning to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day!"

"I will shout for joy and sing your praises, for you have ransomed me." (Psalm 71:23)

Joyful Celebration

> "*Many sacrifices were offered on that joyous day, for God had given the people cause for great joy. The women and children also participated in the celebration, and the joy of the people of Jerusalem could be heard far away.*" Nehemiah 12:43

Jerusalem was abuzz with the sound of musical instruments and the voices of two great Levitical choirs. This was a high day, a day of joyous celebration and a day of dedication. The rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem marked the final restoration of Jewish independence within the umbrella of the Persian Empire - a reason for celebration.

This celebration had been made possible because of the bravery of an orphaned girl who was chosen to be the wife of king Ahasuerus. The Jewish population in the Persian Empire faced genocide. It fell to Esther to act. She chose to breach protocol and enter the king's presence knowing that such an act could result in her execution. Because of her bravery, the Jewish nation survived and shortly thereafter were granted permission to restore the fortifications of Jerusalem and reestablish national autonomy within the Empire. Jewish people still celebrate Esther's bravery at the annual Feast of Purim. (see Esther 8 and 9)

And we are invited to joyous celebration. "Let's celebrate together!", says the Master to the two faithful servants in the parable of the talents. They had acted responsibly and multiplied the talents given to them. This parable points to that glad and glorious celebration when the saved from every nation and generation gather "for the wedding feast of the Lamb". (see Matthew 25:21-23 and Revelation 19:7)

> "Then I heard again what sounded like the shout of a vast crowd . . . "Praise the LORD! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honor to him." (Revelation 19:6-7)

A Reason For Joy

"*What blessings await you when people hate you and exclude you and mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man. When that happens, be happy! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven.*" Luke 6:22-23FP

Get excited about being mocked and minimalized? Be happy about hurtful and hateful words and actions directed against us? Rejoice when we are reviled and denounced for being followers of Christ? Yes, yes and yes! That is the assurance Christ gives us in the opening teachings of His Sermon on the Mount. Our happiness is assured when we:-

Acknowledge our spiritual need - "The Lord can do nothing toward the recovery of man until, convinced of his own weakness, and stripped of all self-sufficiency, he yields himself to the control of God." (E.G. White, Desire of Ages, P.300)

Grieve over our godlessness - "While we sorrow on account of sin, we are to rejoice in the precious privilege of being children of God. . . . The tears of the penitent are only the raindrops that precede the sunshine of holiness. This sorrow heralds a joy which will be a living fountain in the soul." (ibid)

Meekly rise above the slights and scorn of man - "Lowliness of heart is the strength that gives victory to the followers of Christ; it is the token of their connection with the courts above." (p.301)

Have an appetite for the righteousness of God - "All who long to bear the likeness of the character of God shall be satisfied. . . . If the eye is kept fixed on Christ, the work of the Spirit ceases not until the soul is conformed to His image." (p.302)

"but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy." (I Peter 4:13)

Fullness of Joy

"*Now I am coming to you. I told them many things while I was with them in this world so they would be filled with my joy*." John 17:13

Today, let us continue our search for joy by exploring the four remaining teachings of Jesus found in the Beatitudes. These are lessons that will fill us to overflowing with His joy. This fulness of joy is ours when we:-

Show mercy as we have received mercy - Jesus' teaching is, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. . . . Forgive, and you will be forgiven." (Luke 6:36-37 NIV) "The LORD is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all his creation." (Psalm 145:9)

Shun impure and lustful thoughts - "Every impure thought defiles the soul, impairs the moral sense, and tends to obliterate the impressions of the Holy Spirit. It dims the spiritual vision, so that men cannot behold God. The Lord may and does forgive the repenting sinner; but though forgiven, the soul is marred. All impurity of speech or of thought must be shunned by him who would have clear discernment of spiritual truth." (E.G. White, Desire of Ages, p. 302)

Seek peace and make peace - "The only power that can create or perpetuate true peace is the grace of Christ. When this is implanted in the heart, it will cast out the evil passions that cause strife and dissension." (ibid)

Endure criticism and condemnation for Christ - "Each fiery trial is God's agent for [our] refining. Each is fitting [us] for [our] work as colaborers with Him. Each conflict has its place in the great battle for righteousness, and each will add to the joy of [our] final triumph."

(p.306 rendered in the first person)

"I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!" (John 15:11)

Joy Unspeakable

> "You have not seen him, but you love him. You do not see him now but you believe in him, and so you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy."
>
> 1 Peter 1:8 NET

Our blessed Saviour tells us that heaven rejoices over the repentance of a single sinner. We cannot imagine the joy and rejoicing that will burst forth in the heavenly courts when the vast throng of saved from all ages and nations are gathered before the throne of God and of the Lamb.

Johnston Oatman, the songwriter who gave us the encouraging hymn, 'Count Your Blessings', gave us another well known hymn that expresses the inexpressible joy of that heavenly reunion with these words:-

Holy, holy, is what the angels sing,
And I expect to help them
make the courts of Heaven ring;
But when I sing redemption's story,
they will fold their wings,
For angels never felt the joys
that our salvation brings.

Yes, our joy will be full and overflowing at that homecoming. We cannot begin to comprehend the magnitude of a joy that exceeds any earthly experience. But it is not just our joy, or the joy of the heavenly hosts that make the courts of heaven ring. "The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." (Zephaniah 3:17 NIV) That will be joy unspeakable!

> "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever. Amen." (Jude 1:24-25)

— Week Forty-five —

Perfect Peace

"When Christ reigns in the soul, there is purity, freedom from sin. The glory, the fullness, the completeness of the gospel plan is fulfilled in the life. The acceptance of the Saviour brings a glow of perfect peace, perfect love, perfect assurance. The beauty and fragrance of the character of Christ revealed in the life testifies that God has indeed sent His Son into the world to be its Saviour."

(Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons, p.419)

Steps 4, 6 and 7

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Perspectives of Peace

> "*So a horseman went out to meet Jehu and said, "The king wants to know if you are coming in peace." Jehu replied, "What do you know about peace? Fall in behind me!"* " 2 Kings 9:18

What a question! What do any of us know about peace? We know it is a state to be desired and the opposite is a state to be shunned. Is peace a physical state or a matter of the mind? Or is it both? Peace derives meaning from our particular world view, our underlying beliefs, theories and societal frameworks. It is impacted by the continually changing perceptions of presence and location that is our experience within our individual reality of time and space.

Down through the millennia mankind has longed for the security of peace but all too often, in the face of conflict, it has alluded them. Jeremiah expressed the sad situation this way, "We hoped for peace, but no peace came. We hoped for a time of healing, but found only terror." (8:15)

Is peace just the absence of discord or aggression? Or is it a calm state of mind, free from worries, fears and stress? Can such a state be sustained in the face of external or even internal forces that disturb the equilibrium, that rock the boat of our lives?

We can sing of peace and pray for peace. We can long for it, seek and search for it but never realize or attain it. But there is One who says to us, "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid." (John 14:27) The Prince of Peace offers us true peace in a world of discord, conflict and confusion. It is ours to accept!

> "They don't know where to find peace or what it means to be just and good. They have mapped out crooked roads, and no one who follows them knows a moment's peace." (Isaiah 59:8)

Unfounded Promises of Peace

> "*They offer superficial treatments for my people's mortal wound. They give assurances of peace when there is no peace.*" Jeremiah 6:14

It was September 3, 1939. The British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, addressed the Nation and admitted that his and other European leaders efforts to broker peace with Germany's Hitler had failed. The British Empire was plunged into a war that would see countless millions die, national economies brought to their knees and the hope for peace shattered.

We live in a world littered with broken promises of peace. A world where claim and counter claim, ancient rivalries and ongoing ambition, where distrust, deceit and animosities threaten every hope of peace. There are known hot spots around this world where caldrons of discontent and distrust seethe below a thin crust of brokered calm waiting to erupt in fresh waves of retribution and revenge.

What is true in the global scene is also true closer to home. All too often we build up flimsy walls of pretended peace, whitewashed with unsustainable promises. Unresolved family feuds and sibling rivalries can continue for decades, even generations. We may give assurances, or present a persona of peace, but, when inner peace alludes us, the bubble of pretense can burst and reveal the reality of persistent animosities, doubts and fears.

Even the Prince of Peace acknowledges that those who choose to follow Him will face the variance and opposition of unbelieving family members. He says, "Your enemies will be right in your own household!" (see Matthew 10:34-36)

> "When people are saying, "Everything is peaceful and secure," then disaster will fall on them as suddenly as a pregnant woman's labor pains begin. And there will be no escape." (1 Thessalonians 5:4)

Planting Peace

"*And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.*"

James 3:18

There are three elements revealed in this verse - the one who plants, the seeds that are planted and then the product of the planting.

The Peaceable Planter - Jesus calls peacemakers, "the children of God" (Matthew 5:9). These are those who have received wisdom and understanding from the study of God's word and their walk with its author; who do good and live honorable, humble lives (see James 3:13).

The Seeds of Peace - In explaining the parable of the sower, Jesus says, "The seed is God's word." (Luke 8:11) The Psalmist says, "Great peace have those who love Your law. . " (119:165) Seeds of peace are found in the "exceeding great and precious promises" of God found in His word (see 2 Peter 1:2-4). Peter lists out a group of quality 'seeds' to add to our garden of grace. His list includes goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection and love. (Vs.5-7)

The harvest - The harvest can only be as good as what has been sown. Paul reminds us that the person "who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop." (2 Corinthians 9:6) "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life." (Galatians 6:7-8 NKJV)

"So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up." (Galatians 6:9)

Propagating Peace

> "*For I am planting seeds of peace and prosperity among you. The grapevines will be heavy with fruit. The earth will produce its crops, and the heavens will release the dew. Once more I will cause the remnant in Judah and Israel to inherit these blessings.*"
>
> Zechariah 8:12

When he was forty, Moses thought he was ready to be a peacemaker among his people, but this assumption was shattered when his own aggression doomed his efforts to failure (see Acts 7:22-29). It took Moses another forty years of shepherding the sheep of Jethro to master his passions and learn the ways of peace.

Many centuries later, Zechariah was part of another exodus - an exodus from Babylon, a City of Confusion, to Jerusalem, the City of Peace. Unfortunately Jerusalem had not propagated peace and had become a city of confused beliefs and practices. They were exiled to Babylon for seventy years so as to learn to long for peace. On their return, the Lord directed the people to be honest, fair and truthful in a spirit of joyfulness. They were to promote conflict resolution rather than retribution in their courts. They were instructed to "love truth and peace." (See Zechariah 8:16-19)

If they had faithfully followed the Lord's directives, Jerusalem would have become an international centre of peace. People from other nations would have come to them with this request, "Please let us walk with you, for we have heard that God is with you." (See Vs.20-23) Peace loving people propagate peace by example. As they walk with the Prince of Peace, seeds of peace are scattered wherever they go.

> "And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful."
>
> Colossians 3:15

Messengers of Peace

> "*How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, the good news of peace and salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns!*" Isaiah 52:7

In 2007, the acclaimed pianist, conductor, and co-founder of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim, was designated a Messenger of Peace by the United Nations Secretary-General. The orchestra brought young Arab and Israeli musicians together in peaceful harmony. It was formed to promote dialogue and unity of purpose between the various cultures in the otherwise troubled Middle East.

The Boy Scout's Messengers of Peace program initiated in 2011 encourages young Scouts to participate in activities that help to create a better world within the local community. Boy Scouts is but one of many organisations who focus on peacemaking. The world hungers for peace, pursues pathways to peace but finds peace elusive. The call for peace is all too often drowned out by the cry of conflict.

So, as followers of the Prince of Peace, what can we do to promote peace? Paul preached a non-discriminatory gospel. He said, "there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him." (Romans 10:12 NIV) Isaiah speaks of righteousness as being a precursor of peace. He writes, "And this righteousness will bring peace. Yes, it will bring quietness and confidence forever." (Isaiah 32:17) It is in the expression of quiet confidence in our Lord's leading in our lives that prepares us to be effective Messengers of Peace, bearers of the good news that Jesus saves.

> "I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13)

Peace from the Prince of Peace

> "*I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.*" Romans 15:13

It was in the upper room, where Jesus had washed the disciples feet and instituted the memorials of His redemptive act, that Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you . . ." (John 14:27 NKJV) His peace is not a commodity but a state of being that He shares with us. After His resurrection, His first words to His disciples were, "Peace be with you. . ." (John 20:21), a phrase that was repeated for the benefit of doubting Thomas eight days later (see V.26).

Peace, this 'state of being' gifted to us from God and His Son, Jesus Christ, is one of three glorious gifts given as an expression of their love for us. John writes of this triune gift in these words, "Grace, mercy, and peace, which come from God the Father and from Jesus Christ—the Son of the Father—will continue to be with us who live in truth and love." (2 John 1:3) Peace comes packaged with grace and mercy, for without them there can be no peace.

Grace is that glorious gift of God that saves us (see Ephesians 2:8). This grace is coupled with the rich mercies that flow freely from the loving heart of God and embrace us in the reassuring and loving arms of our Redeemer (cf. Vs. 4-7) Paul goes on to say, "For Christ himself has brought peace to us" (V.14). He breaks down walls of hostility and brings unity to divergent peoples through His sacrifice (cf. Vs.14-17). It is in oneness with the Prince of Peace that we find true oneness with each other and enter into His peace.

> "Dear brothers and sisters, . . . Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you." (2 Corinthians 13:11)

Peace Perfected

"You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!" Isaiah 26:3

These are the words of a song, a song about "a city designed and built by God" (cf. Vs.1-2; Hebrews 11:10), whose walls are salvation and whose gates are open to those who have walked the path of peace and righteousness prepared and provided by the Lord (cf. Hebrews 12:14). This is "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (V.22).

John the Revelator was given a vision of earthly renewal where he sees that holy heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, descending from the heavens and settling on the earth. This is, indeed, a city of peace where there will be no more sorrow or crying or death. From the throne of God flows a river of living water and on each side of it is the tree of life that brings healing to the hurting from every nation, kindred, tongue and people. (See Revelation 21:1-22:5)

This is a place of perfect peace prepared for us by our Saviour. The night before His crucifixion Jesus said, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. . . I am going to prepare a place for you. When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am." (John 14:1-3) The Prince of Peace has prepared a place of peace in the glorious city of peace for all those who promote peace (cf. Psalm 37:37).

The words of today's text prompted Vivian Kretz to write:-

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on Thee."
When the shadows come and darkness falls,
He giveth inward peace.
O He is the only perfect resting place,
He giveth perfect peace!
"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on Thee."

— Week Forty-six —

Profound Patience

"All should cultivate patience by practicing patience. By being kind and forbearing, true love may be kept warm in the heart, and qualities will be developed that Heaven will approve."

(Ellen G. White, The Adventist Home, p.106)

Steps 4, 6 and 7

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

The Divine Prerogative of Patience

"*By your patience possess your souls.*"

Luke 21:19 NKJV

Jesus had been telling His disciples about coming national and natural calamities. He warned them of the pathway of persecution that lay before them. In the midst of His discourse He inserts this maxim, "By your patience possess your souls." Jesus is saying that circumstances are going to be such that patience will be essential in attaining and maintaining our spiritual wellbeing.

In His messages to the seven churches, Jesus commends the Church of Ephesus with these words, "You have patiently suffered for me without quitting." (Revelation 2:3) Theirs was not an easy time to live but their tenacity to stay the distance was to be commended. We, too, are called to daily take up our cross and follow Jesus. (See Luke 9:34) This requires patience, persistence and endurance.

When Moses met with Yahweh on Mt. Sinai, the Lord declared, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth," (Exodus 34:6 NKJV), The word 'longsuffering' is also translated from the Hebrew as 'slow to anger' and 'patient'. Patience sits at the centre of the five divine qualities declared by the Lord himself. We seek the expression of these same qualities in our lives as we partake of the divine nature (see 2 Peter 1:4). Peter gives us a similar set of seven divine qualities where the prerogative of patience falls at the very centre. These qualities include goodness, knowledge, self-control, **patient endurance**, godliness, brotherly affection and love.(see Vs.5-7).

"May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ."

(2 Thessalonians 3:5)

Patience as a Process

> "*We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.*" Romans 5:3-4

What do you mean, Paul, when you suggest that we rejoice when we are confronted by problems? In this age of instant gratification, problems are a pain, something to be avoided. They frustrate us, annoy us, and drive us to distraction. And you say that there are benefits that accrue from problems and trials?

Well, we could ask such questions of Paul, for we tend to want to avoid difficulties. But Paul is telling us that problems teach us patience, an essential character quality needed by those looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our soon to return Saviour.

It was during the last week of His ministry that Jesus reminded His disciples what the future held for them. He told them that they faced hatred, persecution, betrayal, deception and even death because of their faith in Him. The attractions of a sin saturated world would cool the ardour and love of many for the faith. (see Matthew 24:9-12) He had given a similar warning when He earlier commissioned the twelve to go out and witness "to the people of Israel—God's lost sheep" (10:6) He warned them that they would even face arrest, floggings and trials at the hands of their countrymen (Vs. 16-18). Animosity and anger would arise within families that would test the patience of those who had committed to take up the cross and follow Jesus (see Vs. 21-22).

To those of us who experience such trials and tribulation the, the Lord says:-

> "But everyone who endures to the end will be saved."
> (Matthew 10:22; cf. 24:13)

The Fruit of Patience

> "*And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest.*"
>
> Luke 8:15

Patience is the fourth of the nine fruits of the spirit listed by Paul in his letter to the Galatians (see ch.5:22-23). None of these fruits are forbidden. We are encouraged to partake of them freely. As Paul explains, "There is no law against these things!" Patience is not a forbidden fruit. It is a good grain that we are encouraged to cultivate and consume. Be assured, patience is one of the 'good things' that the Lord gives those who choose to do what is right (cf. Psalm 84:11).

There are no dietary restrictions on this food. In fact it is a 'fruit' that we can freely eat of. It is an essential nutrient for our daily spiritual stability particularly when the pressures of life fall heavy upon us. It tolerates the daily grind in the mill of life. It bears the kneading, the shaping, and the heat that produces baked in goodness. It is a daily staple that, combined with other good things, satisfies the hunger for the soul.

The goodness of patience can be destroyed by the fiery flames of anger, spoiled by the fungating threads of lust or rendered unpalatable by the staleness of indifference and neglect.

Coupled with kindness, purity, understanding and love, God given patience helps us live in harmony with each other, it gives evidence of the Holy Spirit's perfecting presence in our lives. (see 2 Corinthians 6:6; Romans 15:5)

> "Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen."
>
> (James 5:7)

Patience Tested

> "*In everything we do, we show that we are true ministers of God. We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind.*"
>
> 2 Corinthians 6:4

Paul, the author of our text for today, new something about trouble. Early on he was a practised trouble-maker, at least for the fledgling followers of The Way. That was until 'The Way' personally confronted him on the road to Damascus and commissioned him to bear witness of Him to the gentiles and kings as well as his own people (see Acts 9:15). With corrected commitment, Paul set out to proclaim the good news even though he had to repeatedly and patiently endure every kind of trouble, hardship and calamity.

Even the Lord's patience is tested. The author of Hebrews, quoting from Psalm 95, writes, "There your ancestors tested and tried my patience, even though they saw my miracles for forty years." (Hebrews 3:9) Paul asks, "Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?" (Romans 2:4)

In the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins, Jesus illustrates the importance of patient preparedness. The test came when the bridegroom delayed his coming and the reserves of faith ran out for the five foolish virgins. The lesson of this parable is spelt out by Jesus, "So you, too, must keep watch! For you do not know the day or hour of my return." (Matthew 25:13) This lesson is repeated a few days later in Gethsemane, "Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!" (26:41) Through patient preparedness, then:-

> "We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love." (2 Corinthians 6:6)

Persistently Patient

"*We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need*." Colossians 1:11

Never give up, Jesus is coming.
It's the darkest just before dawn.
Never give up, Jesus is coming.
Never give up, keep holding on!

So go the encouraging words of Chuck Fulmore's song, a song that echoes the sentiment of our verse for today. It tells of the One who can give us the courage, strength and faith to carry on despite the deteriorating state of a world in crisis. "Never give up, keep holding on!"

Persistence in patience is a virtue that is gifted to those who hold firm to their faith without wavering (see Hebrews 10:23) Twentieth century publisher of humour, Arnold H. Glasow, extols the virtue of patience with this catchy quote, "The key to everything is patience. You get the chicken by hatching the egg, not by smashing it." Frustrations and doubt are the enemies of patience. Hence the call, "Never give up, keep holding on!"

The inventor of the incandescent lamp, Thomas Edison, we are told, new something about patience. He is quoted as saying, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." In the end, his patient persistence payed off. His example has inspired many budding inventors to persist until their search for solutions leads to success. Edison offers this pithy comment, "Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time." Yes, never give up, keep holding on to the Saviour who patiently walks with us, leads us and sustains us.

"But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness." (1 Timothy 6:11 NKJV)

Persevering Patience

> "*And remember, our Lord's patience gives people time to be saved*." 2 Peter 3:15 FP

What a wonderfully reassuring promise! Peter could make this statement from a position of personal experience. Peter, the disciple who declared, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16 NKJV) but later thrice declared, "I do not know the man!" Peter, who, after the resurrection, was thrice asked the question, "Do you love me?", then responded, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." (John 21:15-17) It was to this same Peter that the persevering, persistent and patient Good Shepherd said, "follow me", and called him to be a shepherd to the flock of His faithful followers. (see Vs.18-21)

In the second half of our text for today Peter speaks of Paul who had a similar experience with the patience of Christ. Hence Paul, who declared himself to be the chief of sinners, could write, "But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life." (1 Timothy 1:16)

There is something so wonderfully gracious and reassuringly good about the patience of our Lord. Peter tells us, "you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day." (2 Peter 3:8) Our eternal Lord is not bound by time as we are but He has promised us a place in the realms of His eternity. So, while we dwell in the domain of ticking time, let us learn the lesson of persevering patience.

> "The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent." (2 Peter 3:9)

Patience Perfected

> "*But you, Timothy, certainly know what I teach, and how I live, and what my purpose in life is. You know my faith, my patience, my love, and my endurance.*"
>
> 2 Timothy 3:10

For many years Timothy had been a companion and co-worker with Paul. In this letter to Timothy, Paul, his mentor, addresses him as "my dear son" in the faith (see 1:2;2:1), a son who had learnt well the teachings, the life style and the life purposes of a Christian evangelist. In our text for today there are two major characteristics of Paul's life that he wants Timothy to reflect on. They are expressed in two couplets - his faith and patience (Greek-makrothymia), and his love and endurance (Greek-hypomonē). Because both Greek words convey the idea of patient endurance, we could rephrase the couplets this way:-

Enduring Faith - Faith that is founded firmly in the Word of God as revealed in scripture and expressed in the Word made flesh, our saviour, Jesus. This is an unassailable faith fixed firmly in the Rock of Ages. This is a faith that cannot be moved even in the midst of the storms of life.

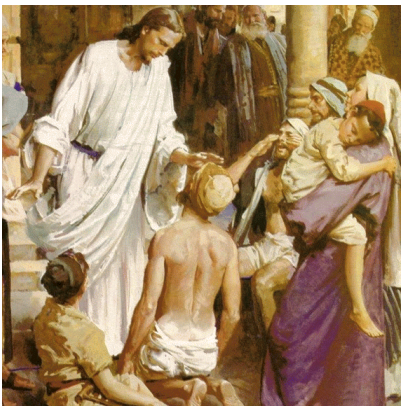
Enduring Love - A love that responds to the everlasting love of God. Yes, "We love Him because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19 KJV) His everlasting, enduring love is a love that will not let us go. And when we abide in His love and reciprocate that love, we willingly do His will, we keep His commandments, we love Him with our whole being and love others with all the compassion and concern that we have for ourselves.

Herein is our patience perfected in preparation for an eternity of uncompromising faith and everlasting love.

> "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. (Revelation 14:12 NKJV)

— Week Forty-seven —

Compassion and Kindness



"Come close to the great Heart of pitying love, and let the current of that divine compassion flow into your heart and from you to the hearts of others. Let the tenderness and mercy that Jesus has revealed in His own precious life be an example to us of the manner in which we should treat our fellow beings . . . We cannot tell how far-reaching may be our tender words of kindness, our Christlike efforts to lighten some burden. The erring can be restored in no other way than in the spirit of meekness, gentleness, and tender love." (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, Vol.5, p.612)

Steps 4, 6 and 7

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

The God of Compassion

> "*The LORD passed in front of Moses, calling out, "Yahweh! The LORD! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness*." Exodus 34:6

Compassion is an expressed character quality of the Great I AM! It is an outpouring of His very nature, an expression of His essential personhood - of His unfailing, everlasting love. It is that quality that moves one from a position of concern for the hurt or misfortune of another to an active involvement in the alleviation of their suffering.

In our text for today, we find the LORD responding to Moses' desire to see His glory. So it was that Moses climbed up Mount Sinai for an intimate encounter with the LORD and heard the mighty declaration of God's character. Because of this declaration, Moses bowed down and worshipped the LORD and asked that He journey with them, forgive them and make them His "special possession".

The LORD of compassion covenants to be with His people, those who honor Him by living in accord with the terms of the covenant, the ten principles of love He spoke from the Mount and then wrote with His own finger on two tablets of stone.

God's compassion has been tested multiple times down through history. But, with a patience that surpasses parental patience, He has repeatedly stepped in so as to bring hope to the despairing and healing to the hurting. Reflecting on the declaration of God in our text for today, King David declares, "The LORD is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all his creation." (Psalm 145:9) This was fully demonstrated in the life and death of our Lord, the only begotten of the Father, the compassionate Christ.

> "The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him."
>
> (Psalm 103:13)

The King of Kindness

> "*The LORD is righteous in everything he does; he is filled with kindness*." Psalm 145:19

Jesus told a parable about kindness in response to a question Peter asked about forgiveness. It tells of a King who finds that one of his top ranking servants owes him 10,000 talents. Now 10,000 talents at the time of telling would have represented about 200,000 years' wages. This is an impossible debt and the King responds to the servants plea for patience with such compassion that he releases the servant and cancels the debt. Unfortunately, the servant failed to follow the kings example of compassion and kindness and imprisons a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii, or 100 days wages. On hearing of this the king casts the ungrateful servant into prison. Jesus ends the parable with this warning, "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." (Matthew 18:35; cf.21-34)

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, takes up the same principle when he warns us about judging others for the very things we do ourselves. He pleads, "Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?" (Romans 2:4)

God's immeasurable and undeserved kindness frees us from the penalty of our sins (see 3:24). His everlasting and unbounded nature of love flows forth in streams of compassion for fallen humanity, and is expressed in His immense kindness and willingness to forgive our rebellion. He declares us righteous because of what Jesus has done for us by taking our indebtedness upon himself so that we can be freed to share in His eternal glory.

> "In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus." (1 Peter 5:10)

Motivated by Compassion

> "*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*" Matthew 9:36

There is nothing that prompts compassion more than helplessness and nothing so helpless as thwarted compassion.

There is nothing so distressing as the inability to act on the desire to help. How often we hear stories of people ready to risk life and limb to rescue a beloved family member, a stranger or an animal from a fiery conflagration, a precarious situation or a raging flood only to realise that their desire to help is more than matched by the flames, the flood or their incapacity to effectively act in the situation.

The Gospels are filled with wonderful stories of Christ's compassion for the sick and the hurting. His life was an ever-flowing expression of His Father's compassion, mercy, unfailing love and faithfulness (cf. Psalm 86:15). Yet, He who had the power to heal the sick, raise the dead and calm the storm, also felt the helplessness of compassion thwarted. Motivated by the essence of His inner being, He came to this earth on a rescue mission, a mission of deliverance only to be rejected by those whom he had chosen to shower His favour on. In anguish He cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me." (Luke 13:34)

How tragic it would be if we were to reject the hand of saving compassion proffered to us, and, in that final hour of reckoning, hear the anguished cry, "But you wouldn't let me".

> "LORD, you know the hopes of the helpless. Surely you will hear their cries and comfort them."
>
> (Psalm 10:17)

Conduits of Kindness

> "*One day David asked, "Is anyone in Saul's family still alive—anyone to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?"*" 2 Samuel 9:1

In 2 Samuel 9 is told the story of David's dealings with Mephibosheth, the crippled son of David's beloved friend, Jonathan, the son of Saul the first King of Israel. Mephibosheth had broken both feet in a fall when he was five (see 4:4). The injury left him lame for life. Jonathan had been loyal to David his friend, even though his father had sought to kill David on multiple occasions. So, some years later, David seeks to show kindness to any survivors of Saul's family in remembrance of his dear friend, Jonathan.

David repeats the question to Ziba, a past servant of Saul's household, but with an interesting variation. He asked, "Is anyone still alive from Saul's family? If so, I want to show God's kindness to them." (V.3) David now wants to show 'God's kindness' to Mephibosheth. In reality, David sees himself as a conduit through which God's kindness can pass to others.

We, too, can become conduits of God's compassion and kindness. Paul, in writing to the Romans, lists seven gifts that God bestows upon His people (see Romans 12:6-8) of which four relate specifically to acts of compassion and kindness. He says, "If your gift is serving others, serve them well. . . If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. . . And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly." Then he adds, "Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them." (V.9)

What a privilege it is to be conduits of God's kindness! We are to clothe ourselves with "tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." (see Colossians 3:12)

> "In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus." (1 Peter 5:10)

On Being a Kindly Compassionate Community

> "*Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another*;"
>
> Romans 12:10 KJV

Jesus taught an eternal and essential principle of community when, in the sermon on the mount, He declared, "So in everything, **do to others what you would have them do to you**, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12 NIV) This ancient maxim, known since the early 17th Century as the "Golden Rule" and later as the "Law of Reciprocity", has been expressed in various forms by many cultures and traditions in the ages past. Its acceptance and application brings us into harmonious community, a community founded on the 'Rock', Christ Jesus.

Paul teaches us that a Christ centred community rids itself of the foul rags of "anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language" and puts on garments of "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" with all forbearance, tolerance and forgiveness. (see Colossians 3:12-13 NIV) Then, Paul adds one final embellishment that gives the finishing touch to what becomes the distinctive and distinguishing uniform of God's chosen people. He says, "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." (V.14)

The author of Hebrews adds five more qualities of a Christ centred community. It extends hospitality, helps the needy, honours marriage, avoids materialism and gladly shares - all this as an offering of praise to God. (See chapter 13:1-25)

> "And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful."
>
> (Colossians 3:15)

Life-Giving Kindness

> "*He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.* He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding."
>
> Ephesians 1:7-8

This is a wonderful declaration of God's love and grace. With Paul, we bow in awe and gratitude before the one whose ways are past finding out, whose purposes are sure, and whose love is enduring and all encompassing. In gratitude we can declare. with Paul, that "God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." (Romans 5:8) We were blind to God's goodness, deaf to His promises, living lives worthy of His condemnation yet, in His manifest goodness, kindness and grace He has saved us through the spilt blood of Jesus, His son, and brings us back into an eternal relationship of abiding love with our heavenly Father. This is abundant, life-giving kindness!

As recipients of His bountiful kindness, we are called to extend our kindness to even our enemies. Ours is not to be an exclusive kindness but an inclusive kindness. Jesus says, "If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that." (Matthew 5:47) The thing that differentiates a true Christian from the crowd is how they respond to Jesus direction to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (see V.44) We are called " to be perfect, even as [our] Father in heaven is perfect," who "gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike." (Vs. 48, 45) Such is the quality of kindness we are called to emulate. This is redemptive, life-giving kindness!

> "How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings." (Psalm 36:7 NKJV)

The Compassionate City

> "*And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. . . . He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain.*" Revelation 21: 2,4

Karen Armstrong, founder of the global movement, 'The Charter for Compassion', describes a compassionate city as an uncomfortable city! Uncomfortable about homelessness, hunger and childhood deprivation and acts with compassion to alleviate these uncomfortable issues. A 'Compassionate City' takes the Golden Rule as the guiding principle for all actions and interactions and seeks to restore compassion to the centre of morality.

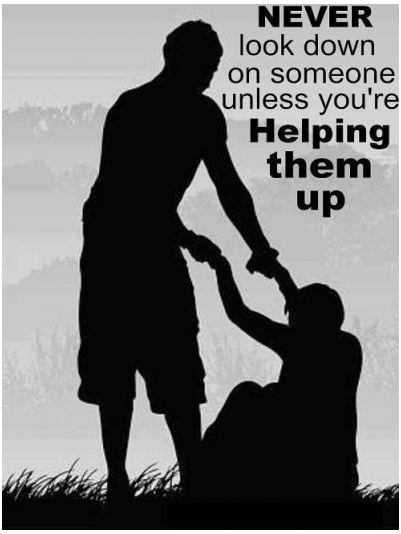
Such a worthy ideal may never be fully attained in this sinful world, but it is certainly guaranteed in that heavenly city of peace. Those who come to dwell in that city will not be uncomfortable because every sorrow will be assuaged, every hurt healed, every need met and every regret removed. 'There will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain.' All who are resident in that city are recipients of the gracious, redemptive and compassionate act of our heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus. They rejoice in the presence of their compassionate King.

Citizens of that city will, like their Lord, be tenderhearted and compassionate one to another. Motivated by unspoilt love, they will gladly live and act in a spirit of oneness and true unity. Their minds and purposes will be marked by wholehearted agreement and an overwhelming and undying gratitude for all that their Saviour has done for them through His humble and selfless service and sacrifice (see Philippians 2). This will truly be the City of Compassion!

> "You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate." (Luke 6:36)

— Week Forty-eight —

Godly Goodness



"What a man is, has greater influence than what he says. The quiet, consistent, godly life is a living epistle, known and read of all men. True character is not something shaped from without, or put on; but it is something radiating from within. If true goodness, purity, meekness, lowliness, and equity are dwelling in the heart, the fact will be manifest in the character; and such a character is full of power."

(Ellen G. White, Gospel Workers,(18920 p.243)

Steps 4, 6 and 7

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Our Good God

> "*How kind the LORD is! How good he is! So merciful, this God of ours!* " Psalm 116:5

Let's repeat it again and again!

> "How kind the LORD is! How good he is! So merciful, this God of ours! "

There is none to compare with Him. The scriptures declare, "No one is righteous - not even one . . . No one does good, not a single one." (Romans 3:10,12) There is only one who is truly good. One day a man came running to Jesus and addressed Him as 'Good Teacher'. Jesus questioned his use of this appellation. ""Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good."" (Mark 10:18) Ultimate goodness belongs to God alone. All other goodness is derived from Him.

When Moses was in intimate dialogue with his Lord about the coming journey to the promised land and his desire for the Lord to go with them, he made this very bold and personal request, "Then show me your glorious presence." The Lord answered him with this declaration, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will call out my name, Yahweh, before you. For I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose." (Exodus 33:18-19). On that day, when the Lord passed before Moses, He declared His goodness again, "Yahweh! The LORD! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6) The great and glorious 'I AM' is all goodness and that goodness is poured out on us in compassion and mercy.

> "Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow." (James 1:17)

Created Very Good

> "*Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day.*" Genesis 1:31

The eternal and only wise God, the creator of all things, spoke this living planet into existence. He took this formless sphere we call earth, bathed it in light, clothed it in an oxygen rich atmospheric canopy, separated out the realms of land and sea and called forth a wondrous variety of living, self-reproducing and life supporting forest and field plants, all with a role to play in the echo-system we call earth. He established the clockwork of times, tides and seasons, the rhythms of day and night, and the changing patterns of light shed by sun, moon and stars. On the fifth and sixth days He spoke into existence all manner of creatures, both large and small, that swim in the sea, fly in the air and move upon the land.

Then, as the crowning act of His creation, God formed a man and a woman in His own image and gave them dominion and responsibility for the good of all other living things on the planet. God gave them the power and privilege of free choice so that they could have a good, meaningful and loving relationship with their creator.

Looking over the vast array of all He had made, God was pleased with what He saw and declared that it was 'very good'. And so God rested on the seventh day and established it as holy time, a memorial to His creative power and immeasurable goodness. A time when His earthly stewards could, like Him, look back on the activities of the previous six days, evaluate their actions and their walk with their creator and be able to declare it all to be very good.

> "He gave his life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us his very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds." (Titus 2:14)

The Rebirth of Goodness

> "*I long to obey your commandments! Renew my life with your goodness.*" Psalm 119:40

Nicodemus, that highly ranked Pharisee who came to Jesus under the canopy of darkness, was bewildered by the initial response Jesus gave. He had acknowledged the heavenly origins of the miracle working ministry of Jesus (John 3:1-2) but Jesus had said, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God." (v.3) This seemingly impossible proposition surprised Nicodemus, but Jesus pressed home the point and explained that entrance into the kingdom of God is only possible through a Spirit breathed rebirth and renewal (Vs.4-8).

In His explanation to Nicodemus Jesus added another element to the rebirth experience. He said "no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit." (V.5) Even as a babe has to break forth from the watery world of the womb so as to take that first breath of life, so those passing through the rebirth experience need to break forth from the watery grave of the past through baptism, sever the umbilical cord of worldly influences and take those first breaths of the spirit filled life. And even as a new born only has life as long as it keeps breathing, so we only sustain that born again experience by continually breathing in the pure, unpolluted atmosphere of the Holy Spirit. Even as a babe moves from the dark world of the womb to the life supporting light of day, so the new born believer need not ever walk again in darkness as long as they continue to faithfully follow Jesus, the life giving 'light of the world' (cf. Vs. 19-21; 8:12) and relish the light that comes from the lamp of His word (Psalm 119:105).

> "This is a trustworthy saying, and I want you to insist on these teachings so that all who trust in God will devote themselves to doing good. These teachings are good and beneficial for everyone." (Titus 3:8)

The Gifts of God's Goodness

> "*How great is the goodness you have stored up for those who fear you. You lavish it on those who come to you for protection, blessing them before the watching world.*" Psalm 31:19

It is in the context of an aggressive and hostile situation that David writes these words. Even his friends had abandoned him and his neighbours held him in contempt (see context). Yet, in this situation, he was able to speak of the great goodness that God, in His good pleasure, lavishes on those who put their trust in Him.

Jesus declared, "Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32 NKJV) This was the good news that Jesus preached, the good news that, in response to our belief and faith in Him, we are released from condemnation, from the shackles of guilt and shame, from the fetters of past failures so that we can walk in newness of life and live in kingdom confidence, certainty and assurance.

Paul reminds us that "it is God who is working in [us], enabling [us] both to desire and to work out His good purpose." (see Philippians 2:13 HCSB) Peter concurs with Paul when he declares, "God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen." (1 Peter 4:10-11)

> "For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps."
>
> (1 Peter 2:21)

Following The Good Shepherd

> "*I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, . . . They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.*"
>
> John 10:14,16

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is calling His sheep out from every national, cultural, ethnic and language group on the face of this earth - He's calling them into one flock of followers who gladly follow Him because they know Him, have experienced His saving grace and have come to trust Him unreservedly. And He calls to us and says, "Come, follow me."

David, the shepherd king, acknowledges the Good Shepherd in so many of his Psalms, but it is in Psalm 23 that he focuses his poetic gift on the One who meets our every need. He is there through the good times and the bad. He is with us, guiding and protecting, comforting and correcting. And then, in conclusion, David confidently declares, "Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever."

The psalmist gives us a good reason to follow the Good Shepherd. He states, "You made me; you created me. Now give me the sense to follow your commands." (Psalm 119:73) Yes Lord, give us the sense to forsake our senseless, purposeless ways and to listen to your voice, to follow your leading, and to walk humbly with you along the right path. Yes, with David, we can pray, "Show me the right path, O LORD; point out the road for me to follow" (25:4), the path that leads us home to the safety of Your sanctuary (see 77:13)

> "This is what the LORD says - your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is good for you and leads you along the paths you should follow." (Isaiah 48:17)

Models of God's Goodness

> "*But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.*" 1 Peter 2:9

We are called to a higher calling, to be models of God's goodness. The Lord, who is unwilling that any should perish, has lavished on us His wondrous love expressed so completely in the life of His self-sacrificing Son. He has redeemed us to Himself through the spilt blood of Jesus. We have been chosen to be vessels of honor, recipients of the grace and goodness of God so that we can be conveyers of His goodness to others.

A young man came to Jesus with the question, "What good thing must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16) Jesus reminded him that there is only one who is good and that he had an obligation to obey the good God's commands. The young man boasted that he had indeed kept them. Then he asked, "What else must I do?" It was then that Jesus pointed to where he fell short - he lacked compassion and generosity, true elements of God's goodness. Such is an expectation of the true follower of Christ.

Paul, in His letter to the Romans, said, "I am fully convinced, my dear brothers and sisters, that you are full of goodness." (15:14) Such goodness comes exclusively from God who, alone, is good. It is when we open our hearts and invite the Lord to come in, when His will becomes ours, when we walk unreservedly as one with Him, that we become models of God's goodness, living examples of God's grace.

> "Dear friend, . . . Follow only what is good. Remember that those who do good prove that they are God's children, and those who do evil prove that they do not know God." (3 John 1:11)

Expressions of Godly Goodness

> "*For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*" Romans 14:17

Most Bible translations render the phrase, 'living a life of goodness', with one word - 'righteousness'. The Greek word, '*dikaiosynē*' conveys the idea of integrity, virtue, purity of life, rightness, and correctness of thinking, feeling, and acting. These qualities, complemented with peace and joy, are Kingdom qualities expressed in the believer through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life. Let us consider these qualities - qualities that are an expression of a life of godly goodness.

Integrity - "Joyful are people of integrity, who follow the instructions of the LORD." (Psalm 119:1)

Virtue - Take, for example, the moral excellence modelled by the Bible characters, Joseph and Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Purity - "Teach me your ways, O LORD, that I may live according to your truth! Grant me **purity of heart**, so that I may honor you." (Psalm 86:11)

Rightness - "the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: **to do what is right**, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Correct thinking, feeling and acting - "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves." (Philippians 2:3)

Peace - "Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them." (Psalm 119:165 KJV)

Joy - "You lead me in the path of life; I experience absolute joy in your presence; you always give me sheer delight." (Psalm 16:11 NET)

— Week Forty-nine —

Unfailing Faithfulness

"None can know what may be God's purpose in His discipline; but all may be certain that faithfulness in little things is the evidence of fitness for greater responsibilities. Every act of life is a revelation of character, and he only who in small duties proves himself "a workman that needeth not to be ashamed" can be honored by God with higher service. (2 Timothy 2:15)." (Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings, p.218)

Steps 4, 6 and 7

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Great is Your Faithfulness

> "*The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning.*"
>
> Lamentations 3:22-23

Out text for today prompted Thomas O. Chisholm to write his well known hymn, 'Great is Thy Faithfulness', the first verse of which reflects this connection:-

Great Is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father!
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

Chisholm lived a rather ordinary life limited by indifferent health, yet, later in life, he wrote, "My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of His providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness." Despite his poor health, he lived some ninety-four years, a living testimony to God's unfailing love and faithfulness.

We find the concept of God's unfailing love and faithfulness sprinkled throughout scripture, from Genesis through to the New Testament but most frequently in the Psalms. The Psalmist declares, "Your faithfulness extends to every generation, as enduring as the earth you created." (Psalm 119:90) Then John explains, "For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17).

> "So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son." (John 1:14)

Models of Faithfulness - 1

> "*We proudly tell God's other churches about your endurance and faithfulness in all the persecutions and hardships you are suffering.*" 2 Thessalonians 1:4

Paul had a lot of good things to say about the church in Thessalonica. They were a church that grew strong despite severe persecution, and developed a reputation among the early churches. In his first letter to them, Paul declares, "so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia . . . your faith in God has become known everywhere." (1Thessalonians 1:8 NIV)

These were models of 'faithful work', 'loving deeds' and 'enduring hope' (V.3 NLT). They had "received the message [the Good News] with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought [them]" (cf. Vs. 5-6) They had enthusiastically embraced the blessed hope of the second coming of their Saviour, abandoned the idolatrous practices of the region and had turned to serving the living and only true God (Vs 9-10).

There is something eminently appealing about faithfulness. We admire it in faithful Bible characters like Joseph and Daniel, in the faithfulness of animals who have bonded with humans. We see it in the inbuilt and lifelong bonds of family and responsible parenthood. Or we cringe with regret when the expected faithfulness is not forthcoming but is replaced by neglect and abuse. Faithfulness is a covenantal practice that belongs to a committed relationship - a relationship of implicit trust and conscientious commitment. Faithfulness faces the spectre of hardship and persecution with integrity, resolve and patience.

> "After all, what gives us hope and joy, and what will be our proud reward and crown as we stand before our Lord Jesus when he returns? It is you! Yes, you are our pride and joy." (1Thessalonians 2:20)

Models of Faithfulness - 2

> "*Some of the traveling teachers recently returned and made me very happy by telling me about your faithfulness and that you are living according to the truth.*" 3 John 1:3

John is addressing these words of commendation to Gaius, a believer who clearly came to faith through the ministry of John. He continues with this commendation, "I could have no greater joy than to hear that my children are following the truth." (V.4) Gaius was a believer in practical Christianity. His particular spiritual gift was hospitality. He faithfully cared for the 'travelling teachers', itinerant ministers of the gospel who went from community to community strengthening the faith of the believers (V.5).

It is clear that Gaius did this despite criticism and hostility from another member of the church, Diotrephes. Diotrephes loved the role of leader but took it to the extreme. He did not approve of itinerant teachers and forbade church members from helping them. John had written to the church but Diotrephes had ignored John's counsel and had spread malicious gossip about him and his fellow messengers of hope. He even went so far as to disfellowship any one who helped them. In helping the travelling teachers, Gaius risked the wrath of this over zealous, self-opinionated member. John counsels, "don't let this bad example influence you." (Vs.9-11)

Gaius demonstrated a living, active faith and commitment to the teachings of He who is 'the way, the truth and the life'. He had been taught by John, the beloved disciple who had walked with, and was committed to the teachings of Jesus, 'the truth'. Gaius lived these teachings in a practical way, and, in so doing, became a true model of faithfulness.

> "I will search for faithful people to be my companions. Only those who are above reproach will be allowed to serve me." (Psalm 101:6)

In Little Things

> "*'Well done!' the king exclaimed. 'You are a good servant. You have been faithful with the little I entrusted to you, so you will be governor of ten cities as your reward.'*" Luke 19:17

Mary King, a devout Calvinist Christian, served as a humble cook in the house of John Swindell. Swindell ran a school in Newmarket, Cambridgeshire, England. For a short time he had a 15 year old teenager and recent convert, Charles Spurgeon, helping him. Charles found, in Mary King, one with whom he could confidently seek answers to his questions and convictions. Of this lowly and devout lady, Spurgeon would later write, "From her I got all the theology I ever needed." Her humble contributions to his growing understanding, her listening ear and strong faith were instrumental in Spurgeon's development into the "Prince of Preachers". Well done, Mary King.

Jesus emphasized the importance of little things. It is just a little seed that grows into a mighty tree. It takes only a little spark to start a raging fire. An act of simple kindness to the lowliest of individuals is reckoned by the King of Kings and Lord of Lords as an act of kindness to Himself. Faithfulness in the little things of life prepares us for greater roles and responsibilities. It is only by many small, deftly placed strokes of the brush that a masterpiece is created. We may only be the humblest of servants in the household of heaven, but our lowly part in presenting a portrait of Christ before the world is as important to the Lord as the greatest contribution of any preacher, prophet or king. The reward of heaven is for those who are faithful in little things. The Lord says, "Come, . . . inherit the kingdom prepared for you". (Matthew 25:34)

> "If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities."
>
> (Luke 16:10)

Constancy

> "*We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you at our prayers, remembering unceasingly your work of faith, and labour of love, and enduring constancy of hope, of our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father; knowing, brethren beloved by God, your election.*"
>
> 1 Thessalonians 1:2-4 DBY

As certain as day follows night, and the heavenly bodies move in clockwork precision and order, so should be our confidence in the saving grace of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. In our text for today we find these words of commendation, penned in his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, where Paul uses the Greek word, 'hypomonē', to describe their faithfulness in the faith. 'Hypomone' conveys the idea of steadfastness, constancy and endurance. Theirs was an unswerving certainty born of an unalterable confidence and trust in He who conquered death so that they could receive the promised gift of eternal life.

In this age of global unrest, when leaders and legislators are confronted by mounting uncertainties and expectancies, when nature unleashes ever increasing instances of catastrophic calamities, when our faith is buffeted by false teachings and the godless influences that bombard us, we need to cling more tenaciously to the secure and certain foundation of our faith. We need that enduring constancy, that anchor of certainty that is born of a deep and abiding relationship with the Lord. This comes as the fruit of a consistent walk with our Maker, Redeemer and ever abiding Saviour. It is then that we can cast aside our unstable past and "run with endurance the race God has set before us." (Hebrews 12:1)

> "Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised." (Hebrews 10:36)

Lasting Commitment

"*So come, let's make a covenant, you and I, and it will be a witness to our commitment.*" Genesis 31:44

There was trouble brewing in the relationship between Jacob and Laban, his father-in-law (see Genesis 31). God's obvious blessing was on Jacob who had faithfully served Laban for twenty years despite Laban's devious dealings. In the end, Jacob couldn't tolerate the abuse any longer and decided to return to his home country. When Laban was aware that they had packed up and gone, he pursued Jacob and confronted him. After a heated discussion, they settled their differences and made a covenantal commitment to live peaceably. As a practical reminder of this commitment they gathered stones into a heap as a reminder of their covenant.

In life, we are called to multiple commitments. There are vital family and marriage commitments that we breach to our own and other's detriment. Such commitment involves a cleaving to, a bonding together in love, purpose, intent and oneness. We enter into contractual commitments and workplace agreements. There are compacts and covenants, obligations and arrangements - all are a part of living responsibly and accountably in community.

In our walk of faith we have been directed to turn from our selfish ways, to take up our cross and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24). This is our covenantal obligation, our cross, that is integral to a lasting loving commitment. Our first commitment is to "love the LORD [our] God with all [our] heart, all [our] soul, all [our] mind, and all [our] strength." Then Jesus adds an "equally important" commitment, "'Love your neighbor as yourself." (See Mark 12:30-31)

> "But from eternity to eternity the LORD's faithful love is toward those who fear Him, . . . those who keep His covenant, who remember to observe His precepts." (Psalm 103:17-18)

Faithful Unto Death

> "*Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The devil will throw some of you into prison to test you. You will suffer for ten days. But if you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life.*" Revelation 2:10

These words were written to Smyrna, the second of the seven churches in Asia to whom Jesus sent specific messages. Smyrna is called 'The Persecuted Church' and represents a period of church history when Christians faced immense opposition, imprisonment and death. The Lord says of them, "I know about your suffering and your poverty—but you are rich!" (V.9) Even though they faced affliction and opposition, tolerated ridicule and unfounded accusations, suffered depravation, persecution and even martyrdom, they were commended for the wealth of their faith and the constancy of their commitment.

Periods of persecution have dogged the faithful followers of God. Daniel had warned that such would continue right up to the end of time (see Daniel 11:33-35). Jesus pointed out that his followers would face opposition. He declared, "Then you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are my followers. . . But the one who endures to the end will be saved." (Matthew 24:9,13) Jesus described calamitous end-time events that would come upon the world and added, "But before all this occurs, there will be a time of great persecution . . . because you are my followers." (Luke 21:12) And Paul adds, "Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." (2 Timothy 3:12) Despite this frightening scene, we are assured that those who remain faithful even unto death will be rewarded.

> "God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs."
>
> (Matthew 5:10)

— Week Fifty —

Gently, Gently

"Christ abiding in the heart shines out in the faces of those who love Him and keep His commandments. Truth is written there. The sweet peace of heaven is revealed. There is expressed a habitual gentleness, a more than human love."

(Ellen G. White, Christ Object Lesson, p.102)

Steps 4, 6 and 7

Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

The Good Shepherd

> "Yes, the Sovereign LORD is coming in power. . . . *He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.*"
>
> Isaiah 40:10-11

In these words, Isaiah paints a beautiful picture of our loving and caring LORD, our Sovereign shepherd. The imagery of the divine shepherd is scattered throughout scripture from Genesis to Revelation. On his death bed, Jacob spoke of God, who had walked with his father, Isaac, and grandfather, Abraham, as "the God who has been my shepherd all my life" (Genesis 48:15). David declared, "The Lord is my shepherd . . " (Psalm 23:1), Peter writes of the expected return of "the Great Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4), John the revelator proclaims that the redeemed of the Lord will never hunger or thirst again because "the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd" (Revelation 7:17NIV).

Jesus, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world", says of himself, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (John 1:29; 10:11) There is a close bonding between the Great (Chief) Shepherd and his sheep. They who are His hear His voice and follow Him.

The shepherd leads and the sheep follow. Jesus called to fishermen and said, "Come, follow me . . ." He called to a tax collector and said, "Follow me and be my disciple", and to a young rich man who wanted eternal life He said, "go and sell . . . and give . . . Then come, follow me." (Matthew 4:19; 9:9; 19:21) His sheep hear Him and follow. Do we?

> "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep."
>
> (John 10:14-15)

A Gentle Answer

> "*A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare.*" Proverbs 15:1

With just eleven words Solomon contrasts two possible responses to an aggravation. In the very next couplet Solomon extols the wise use of words. He says, "The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly" (V.2 NKJV). Then, two verses later, he likens gentle words to a tree of life (V.4). Gentle answers and words of wisdom flow from the heart of those whose connection with God leads them to think carefully before speaking. (See V.28)

Gentle words flow from a gentle spirit. Paul begs us to live lives worthy of Christ who has called us into the peaceful unity of the faith. He says, "Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love." (Ephesians 4:2 and context)

In another letter Paul describes some of his dire circumstances as a preacher of the Gospel, as one who was being "treated like the world's garbage." Yet, despite these circumstances, his response is not reciprocal. He writes, "We bless those who curse us. We are patient with those who abuse us. We appeal gently when evil things are said about us". Then he says, "So I urge you to imitate me." (see 1 Corinthians 4:11-13,16)

The Apostle Peter writes from his own experience when he says, "You should clothe yourselves instead with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God." (1 Peter 3:4) We can couple with these words the advice of James who writes, "But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others." (James 3:17). Yes -

> "Everyone enjoys a fitting reply; it is wonderful to say the right thing at the right time!" (Proverbs 15:23)

Facing Ridicule

> "*Sometimes you were exposed to public ridicule and were beaten, and sometimes you helped others who were suffering the same things.*" Hebrews 10:33

The list of synonyms for ridicule is long. It includes mockery, scorn, contempt, teasing and taunts, sneers and sarcasm. None of us like to be lampooned, or to be made the butt of someone's jokes. Constant jeers and jibes can wear at our persona and crush our spirit.

In response we may repeat the idiom, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Never hurt us? Certainly they will hurt unless we "put on every piece of God's armour", His belt of truth, the breastplate of His righteousness, the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation. These are our protection. Then we take the sword of the spirit as our defence and stand firm in the shoes of the Good News of peace (Ephesians 6:13-17).

We may claim that insults roll off us like 'water off a ducks back' but incessant exposure to criticism can break through the waterproofing barrier that prevents the ruffling of our feathers. We can renew that waterproofing by regular quality time with the family of faith. David writes, "How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!" (Psalm 133:1) He likens harmony to an anointing oil or a refreshing dew that promises the blessing of everlasting life (see Vs.2-3). Of course it is important that, as we seek to settle our own 'feathers', we don't ruffle the feathers of others in the flock.

Paul offers us this salient advice as we navigate the rough waters of ridicule and opposition.

> "Bless those who persecute you. . . . Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone."
>
> (Romans 12:14,18)

Turn the Other Cheek

> "*But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.*" Matthew 5:39

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged many preconceived notions about how we relate to life situations. Our text for today is the first of a three part lesson about our response to the attacks and demands of others. The legal expectation is that "the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'" (V.38) but Jesus says, 'do not resist an evil person', rather, be resilient enough to receive added attacks without retaliation, to give more than demanded, to go the second mile (Vs. 39-41). This is the gentle approach modelled by Jesus and advocated by Paul.

On the cross Jesus attitude to His accusers and executioners was, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) This is turning the other cheek to the maximum. "He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7)

"Dear friends", Paul says, "never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God." Quoting from the proverbial wisdom of Solomon, he offers us an alternative, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads." (Romans 12:19-20; cf. Proverbs 25:21-22.) In heeding this we demonstrate the resilience and generosity of the true follower of our Lord.

> "Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. . . . Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good." (Romans 12:17, 21)

Dealing with Dissent

> "*And he is able to deal gently with ignorant and wayward people because he himself is subject to the same weaknesses*." Hebrews 5:2

The author of Hebrews is here talking of the role of the high priest as a representative of the people. Because of his own humanity, the high priest could relate to and then show compassion for those entrusted to his care who had misconceptions, misunderstandings and unbalanced perceptions of God's will for their lives. Like the priestly ministers of old, we have each been chosen, called and commissioned to a royal priesthood to model and minister God's grace and goodness to others (see 1Peter 2:9).

The compassionate Christian will deal gently with those whose understanding has been bent by exposure to years of worldly traditions, opinions and practices. We will remember that we all like sheep have gone astray and the Lord has so gently brought us back to His path.

When Paul was in Athens, the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers invited him to explain his teachings. Paul tried to lead them gently from their polytheistic position to an acknowledgement of their creator and redeemer. He assured them that God, in His mercy, overlooks (winks at) their past ignorance but calls them to a better way. But when he spoke of the resurrection of Jesus, some found that idea unbelievable and mocked him, though some believed (see Acts 17). Paul's own personal experience led him to face the opposition that stems from ignorance or blind arrogance, with gentleness and compassion.

Surely the best answer to dissent, ignorance and waywardness is found in the words of Peter who says:-

> "It is God's will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you." (1 Peter 2:15)

Handling Opposition

> "*Gently instruct those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people's hearts, and they will learn the truth.*" 2 Timothy 2:25

You can't win a heated argument. Paul new this when he said to Timothy, "don't get involved in foolish, ignorant arguments that only start fights." (V. 23) Yes, as servants of the Lord, we are to avoid quarrels with difficult people, but be ready to gently, patiently, discreetly and by example teach them the better way (V.24).

Take the example of Nehemiah (see Nehemiah 2,4). He had come to Jerusalem, with the blessing and support of king Artaxerxes, to restore the city and build it's walls and Temple. When officials from the neighbouring regions - Sanballat the Moabite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab - heard of Nehemiah's project, they sought to discourage the band of workers by mocking their efforts to raise again the city wall from the rubble of the past destruction.

As the work progressed the anger of the opposition increased. They called for Nehemiah to meet them, accusing him of planning a rebellion. They used informants within the city to dissuade him from his purposes, yet he would not come down from his work to argue or debate, but rather, calmly continued the work approved by Artaxerxes.

Our response to opposition should reflect the grace of Christ. Paul's advice is, "Live wisely among those who are not believers, . . . Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone." (Colossians 4:5-6) Let us be ready to forgive reproach and retain a considerate, unperturbed attitude toward those who would oppose us.

> "A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare." (Proverbs 15:1)

Rescuing the Backslider

"*Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.*" Galatians 6:1

Recidivism - the bane of every honest follower of Christ. Paul reminds us of the reality that dogs the path of every believer - the possibility, the danger of slipping back into ungodly patterns, practices and behaviour. So, when he encourages us to be ready to help a fellow follower who has slipped off the path, has lost the battle with a particular besetment, he warns us to take care, watch our step lest we also lose our balance and succumb to sin in a similar way. In another place he warns, "If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall." (1 Corinthians 10:12)

Hence Paul admonishes us to be gentle and humble in offering advice and assistance to the backslider. There is no place for condemnation or criticism. Jesus, when challenged to adjudicate in the case of a woman caught in adultery, finally said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 8:11 NKJV) Paul's admonition makes it clear that we should act with compassion, consideration, care as well as caution as we encourage the fallen back onto the path of faith. Their feelings of failure, inadequacy and self-condemnation can lead them to such a state of remorse and hopeless self-loathing that they feel that they are beyond redemption, unworthy of God's love. It is for us to remind them that "God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us." (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

Lead me gently home, Father,
Lead me gently home, Father,
Lest I fall upon the wayside,
Lead me gently home. (Will L. Thompson)

— Week Fifty-One —

Living the Humble Life

"When Christ left His high command, He might have taken upon Him any condition in life that He chose. But greatness and rank were nothing to Him, and He chose the most humble walk of life. No luxury, ease, or self-gratification came into His experience. The truth of heavenly origin was to be His theme; He was to sow the world with truth, and He lived in such a way as to be accessible to all. "

(Ellen G. White, Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students, p.259)

Steps 10 and 11

Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

The Model of Humility

"*He gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.*"
Philippians 2:7

He who spoke all things material into existence, who had command over and the adoration of the heavenly hosts; He who is the source and sustainer of life, the proclaimer of eternal principles, the author of order and justice; He who was and is and is to come, ever eternal, ever all powerful, all knowing and all wise; He who will ever be worthy of honour, glory and praise, the very essence and expression of divine goodness and love stepped down from His rightful position of authority and entered the realm of subservience as a new born babe. He grew in favour with God and man and became for us a model of true humility, One who was willing to take the blame, bear the shame and die our death so that we might live.

"For our sake Jesus emptied Himself of His glory; He clothed His divinity with humanity that He might touch humanity, that His personal presence might be among us, that we might know that He was acquainted with all our trials, and sympathized with our grief, that every son and daughter of Adam might understand that Jesus is the friend of sinners." (E.G. White, The Signs of the Times, April 18, 1892)

Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem for the last time, He had warned the disciples of His coming betrayal and predicted fate. But they were jealously vying for positions and promotions within the kingdom they expected Him to establish. Jesus rebuked them, saying, "Whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:27-28)

"You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had." (Philippians 2:5)

The Most Humble Man

> "*(Now Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth.)*" Numbers 12:3

The context of this parenthetical statement sees Moses facing criticism and sibling rivalry. His older siblings, Miriam and Aaron, were respected elders of Israel who held responsible roles under Moses. It appears that they were jealous of the influence of Moses wife, Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, a monotheistic priest and shepherd of Midian (the revered prophet founder of modern day Druze).

The Lord called out to Aaron and Miriam and reminded them that He had a relationship with Moses different from other prophets. He did not use the usual route of visions or dreams to communicate with him, but, rather, because of Moses' level of trustworthiness, the Lord said, "I speak to him face to face, clearly, and not in riddles! He sees the LORD as he is. So why were you not afraid to criticize my servant Moses?" (V.8) When Aaron saw that Miriam was immediately stricken with leprosy, he cried to his brother, "Oh, my master! Please don't punish us for this sin . . ." Then, despite the insult of their criticism, Moses petitioned the Lord on his siblings' behalf, crying out, "O God, I beg you, please heal her!"

Even though Moses had such an honored relationship with the Lord, he remained a humble and caring leader. He stands as a model of true humility. "Those who experience the sanctification of the Bible will manifest a spirit of humility. Like Moses, they have had a view of the awful majesty of holiness, and they see their own unworthiness in contrast with the purity and exalted perfection of the Infinite One." (E.G White, The Great Controversy, p.470)

> "So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor." (1 Peter 5:6)

False Humility

> "*You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the LORD?* " Isaiah 58:5

Our text for today comes from a chapter where God is rebuking pretentious life practices and pretended public piety. The Lord describes a people who are just keeping up appearances, "They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about me. They act like a righteous nation that would never abandon the laws of its God. They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me." (V.2)

Jesus noted this type of behaviour in religious teachers and practitioners of His day. Of them He said, "Everything they do is for show." (Matthew 23:5) They had all the trappings of religiosity, but they lacked true humility and their pompous piety was nothing but a hypocritical sham. In a blistering denunciation of their practices, Jesus called them blind guides and fools. He said, "Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness." (V.28)

Rather than this pious pretense and self-righteous religiosity, the Lord asks us to offer such humble, private service that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing (V.3-4). He asks us to free those in bondage and lighten their burdens. He says, 'share', 'give', 'feed' and 'help' the needy, the afflicted, the burdened and the bound. (Isaiah 58:6-10) In disinterested service we find the antidote to false humility.

> "Feed the hungry, and help those in trouble. Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon."
>
> (Isaiah 58:10)

Learning Humility the Hard Way

> "*His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'* " Luke 15:21

There are times when humiliating circumstances can crush out every drop of personal pride. Certainly we see this working out in the parable of the prodigal son. In arrogance he demanded his inheritance then squandered it all on a profligate life style. At the end he had nothing, no friends, no support, only the life of a pig. It was at this rock bottom moment that "he finally came to his senses" (V.17) and learnt that "God opposes the proud but favors the humble." (1 Peter 5:5)

Possibly no greater example of this is found in the confessions of the mighty ruler of Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar. In his open letter "to the people of every race and nation and language throughout the world" (Daniel 4:1) he tells of his abject pride and arrogance in ignoring the warnings of God given in dreams and his failure to heed the advice of his humble servant, Daniel. He tells how for seven years he was driven from men because of a humiliating episode of insanity. Like the prodigal, he ate with the animals until that epiphany moment when he turned his eyes heavenward and, with a mind cleared of all pride and conceit, acknowledged and praised the Most High. In concluding his letter he declared, "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and glorify and honor the King of heaven. All his acts are just and true, and he is able to humble the proud." (V.37)

All too many of us, like the prodical son and proud Nebuchadnezzar, have learnt (or are still learning) the lesson of humility the hard way. Let's not feign humility but, rather, gladly absorb, then express, the humility of Christ.

> "Better to live humbly with the poor than to share plunder with the proud." (Proverbs 16:19)

Humble Seekers, Willing Followers

> "*Seek the LORD, all who are humble, and follow his commands. Seek to do what is right and to live humbly.*" Zephaniah 2:3 FP

One night, soon after the glorious dedication of the first temple in Jerusalem, the Lord spoke to Solomon warning him that his people would, from time to time, face a test of their faithfulness as a reminder that they were totally dependant on God for life and wellbeing. Then He said, "if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Here is outlined a cyclical process of renewal and regeneration that, like the repeating pattern of yearly seasons, is necessary for spiritual growth and development. We are reminded that the first essential to renewal and regeneration is humility. We need to tame the will, to bring it into subjection to the will of God, to humbly surrender all to His authority in our lives.

We are then admonished to pray and seek a face to face encounter with our Creator. For this to happen we need a deep longing coupled with heartfelt and sincere endeavour (see Deuteronomy 4:29). Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7 NKJV)

Finally, the Lord calls us to turn from our willful wickedness and become willing, obedient followers. There needs to be a willing renunciation of our past and a complete turn around of intent. This means a full and willing capitulation to the authority of God over our lives and a readiness to pray, "Lord, Your will be done in my life, to Your honour and glory".

> "He leads the humble in doing right, teaching them his way." (Psalm 25:9)

The Humble Remnant

"*Those who are left will be the lowly and humble, for it is they who trust in the name of the LORD.*"

Zephaniah 3:12

A message of pending judgement comes through Zephaniah to a world and a people who have failed to heed the lessons of history, who daily "continue their evil deeds." (V.7) The Lord speaks of a time when evil will be purged from the earth by fire, when pride, arrogance and haughtiness will be no more, when a remnant of people, the humble and lowly, will come together with pure speech and one voice to worship the Lord.

Throughout the history of God's people there has been a sobering message delivered by the prophets of old, and echoed by Paul, that "only a remnant will be saved" (Romans 9:27). Humility, lowliness and trust are significant qualities of this remnant, but the Lord, through Zephaniah, speaks of additional, complimentary qualities. He says they "will do no wrong; they will never tell lies or deceive one another. They will eat and sleep in safety, and no one will make them afraid." (V.13)

Such will be the nature of the humble remnant redeemed from the wickedness of this world. In the Father's home city, the New Jerusalem, there will be no tear, no sorrow, no crying and no pain. (cf. Rev 21:4) In the Beatitudes, Jesus quoting from His forebear, David, tells us that the meek (that is the humble and lowly) will inherit the earth (see Matthew 5:5 and Psalm 37:11). Such is the prospect of the humble remnant, such is our prospect when we learn humility.

> "On that day I will gather you together and bring you home again. I will give you a good name, a name of distinction, among all the nations of the earth, as I restore your fortunes before their very eyes. I, the LORD, have spoken!" (Zephaniah 3:20)

The Crown of Victory

> "*For the LORD delights in his people; he crowns the humble with victory.*" Psalm 149:4

Paul was under house arrest in Rome. He was facing an imminent execution that would end his born again work of preaching the gospel of the kingdom. Faithful doctor Luke braved the unknowns of life in Rome under Nero to be present with Paul. It was under these circumstances that Paul writes his second letter to Timothy asking him to come to Rome quickly. In his letter he expresses what is considered his valedictory. He writes, "The time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of his return." (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

Peter, whose missionary journey also ended in Rome, gives us this assurance, "And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of never-ending glory and honor." (1 Peter 5:4) In the following verses he extols the virtue of humility and adds, "So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor." (V.6)

To the persecuted church of Smyrna, Jesus declares, "But if you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10) This crown is for those who 'hold fast' to their faith through the difficulties and circumstances of life in a hostile world. (cf. 3:10-11) Like Paul and Peter, like the victorious faithful down through the ages of history, there is a glorious crown of eternal life for us.

> "To all who mourn in Israel, he will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair."
>
> (Isaiah 61:3)

— Week Fifty-Two —

Free Indeed

"Christ accomplishes our salvation by inspiring faith in our hearts and a belief in the truth. The truth makes free; and those whom the Son makes free are free indeed. Let us seek to honor God by revealing a constantly increasing confidence in the assurance that He will accept every soul who serves Him in sincerity." (Ellen G. White, This Day With God, p.216)

Step 11

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

True Liberty

"*Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage*." Galatians 5:1 NKJV

What is liberty? Is it unrestricted license to do anything without restraint or restriction? That would be lawlessness, and Jesus makes it very clear that there is no place in His kingdom for those "who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7:23 NKJV) John defines lawlessness this way, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." (1 John:3:4 NIV) It seems clear that to have true liberty, we must respect necessary limitations, meet certain obligations and live within the restraint of reasonable rules that respect the person of others and of God.

Jesus' brother counsels us to "So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty." (James 2:12 NKJV) A little earlier in his letter, James speaks of the law of liberty as being perfect (1:25) and calls it "the royal law" (2:8), noting the foundational principle of love to our neighbour as the basis for our social obligations to others. The truest expression of liberty resides in what must become a natural outworking of love - willing obedience to the ten covenantal commands of our creator, redeemer and Royal King.

True liberty resides in the attitude of our mind. It is based on an abiding trust in the One who has designed and created us and has, through His own experience among us, demonstrated the broadest sense of liberty as He willingly became a servant to mankind. He freely took the brave decision to forsake the glory of heaven and the adoration of the heavenly hosts so that He could set us free from the shackles of self doubt and sin and bring us into the realms of true liberty in Him.

"And I will walk at liberty, For I seek Your precepts."
(Psalm 119:45)

Breaking the Bonds

> "*O LORD, I am your servant; yes, I am your servant, born into your household; you have freed me from my chains.*" Psalms116:16

Our text for today comes from a Psalmist who is filled with unending gratitude, for the Lord has saved him from certain death.(v.6) Condemned by the lies of his accusers, he describes his situation in these words, "Death wrapped its ropes around me; the terrors of the grave overtook me." (V.3) Then he cried, "Please, LORD, save me! . . . I am deeply troubled, . . . These people are all liars!" (Vs. 4,10-11) He was now free from the bonds that had held him. In gratitude to the One who, in his goodness, had set him free, he declares, "O LORD, I am your servant . . ."

When the Lord, in His kindness, goodness and mercy, rescues us from our fears, failures, defeatism and despair, and releases us from the bonds of our addictions, hurts, habits and hangups, we, too, will declare, "O LORD, I am Your servant, I will walk in Your presence as I live here on earth!" (cf. V.9) Like the Psalmist, we will ask, "What can I offer You, Lord, for all You have done for me?" (cf. V.12)

What service can we offer? Moses and Micah provide us with all that the Lord asks in return for His gifts of liberation and adoption. They tell us that "He requires only that [we] fear the LORD [our] God, and live in a way that pleases him, and love him and serve him with all [our] heart and soul . . . and . . . always obey the LORD's commands and decrees." He asks us "to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with [our] God." (Deuteronomy 10:12-13; Micah 6:8 rendered in first person) Then, add these words from Isaiah:-

> "No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people." (Isaiah 58:6)

Our Advocate

> "*My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous*."
>
> 1 John 2:1

Our advocacy is assured! Our advocate, our righteous substitute Jesus Christ pleads for us, as he has for others down through this earth's history, and presents Himself as the propitiation, the atoning sacrifice for our's and the world's sins (V.2). Think of it. Jesus, the embodiment of God's amazing love, took His advocacy for this world so seriously that He became one with us and of us. He sealed the bond of the relationship and the guarantee of His advocacy with His own precious blood.

Let's be careful, let's not take our advocate lightly! These words of John make it abundantly clear that the expectation is that we 'will not sin'. Jesus final words to the woman accused of adultery were, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 8:3-11 NKJV) He said to the man He had healed beside the pool of Bethesda, "stop sinning or something even worse may happen to you." (5:14) We are particularly warned that our access to the advocacy offered by the sacrifice of Jesus is jeopardized or even abrogated if we "deliberately continue sinning after we have received knowledge of the truth." (Hebrews 10:26)

The thought that such blatant, retrograde and unrepentant steps could lead us metaphorically up the path to Golgotha, where our actions, like hammer blows, would nail Jesus to the cross once again and hold Him up to public shame (see 6:6), should awaken in us a readiness to seek the advocacy and support of our Saviour whenever we stumble.

> "Even now my witness is in heaven. My advocate is there on high." Job 16:19

Free to be Slaves

> "*Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living*."
>
> Romans 6:18

We can rejoice that sin is no longer our master, that we now "live under the freedom of God's grace." (V.14) But this freedom does not give us the licence to go on sinning. Yes, we have a choice. But if we choose to sin we become slaves again to sin. It can quickly become our master. Paul, the author of our text for today, raises this rhetorical question, "Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey?" (V.16)

Freedom of choice is the special, God given gift to humanity that makes it possible for us to really love. But, in loving, there is an ongoing, individual obligation and commitment to that which is loved. Paul speaks of a time when men will "be lovers of their own selves, . . . lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" and a whole gamut of other sinful indulgences. (2 Timothy 3:1-4) In the verse following our key text, Paul explains, "Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy." (Romans 6:19)

As willing slaves to righteous living, a living style modelled so beautifully by Jesus and copied to His glory, we are drawn ever closer together in bonds of oneness with each other and our Master Slave, Jesus (cf. Philippians 2:7-11). Yes, Jesus freely chose to be a slave for us, gave up His rights and privileges so that we can traverse the Highway of Holiness (see Isaiah 35:8) as slaves with Him.

> "I have swept away your sins like a cloud. I have scattered your offenses like the morning mist. Oh, return to me, for I have paid the price to set you free."
>
> (Isaiah 44:22)

No More Crying

> "*I will rejoice over Jerusalem and delight in my people. And the sound of weeping and crying will be heard in it no more.*" Isaiah 65:19

The Highway of Holiness that Isaiah speaks of in chapter thirty-five, leads to the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. Only those who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, who walk in God's ways, will be able to traverse that Holy Highway (see 35:8,9). The redeemed, those who are slaves to righteousness from all ages, peoples, tongues and nations, will walk triumphantly with their Master Slave, but now Mighty Lord and King, in through the gates of that glorious City into their heaven prepared home, the house of their heavenly Father.

King David will be there to meet the ONE who kept track of all his sorrows, who bottled his tears and recorded them in the books of heaven (see Psalm 56:8) along with the many tears of those who have entered into the triumph of their Lord. Now the tear bottles are sealed, all tears are wiped away, there is no more reason to cry - no death, no sorrow, no pain - "All these things are gone forever." (Revelation21:4) Everything is new!

It is in this city that the uncountable crowd of the saved will stand before the throne of God and the Lamb shouting and singing Their praises. The whole of the heavenly host join them in proclaiming the glory, the wisdom, the honor and power of the enthroned Majesty of Heaven and Earth, the Sovereign LORD who has cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. (7:9-12; Micah 7:19) The LORD our God, our Redeemer declares, "You are my people." (Isaiah 51:16)

> "He will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears. He will remove forever all insults and mockery against his land and people. The LORD has spoken!" (Isaiah 25:8)

Freedom in Christ

"*For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin.*" Romans 6:7

Six verses earlier, Paul raises the question, "Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply?" and then declares emphatically, "Absolutely not!" (Vs.1-2 HCSB) He speaks of baptism as a symbol of the death and burial of our sinful nature through the sacrifice of our sin bearing Saviour. But, when we are lifted from that watery grave in a resurrection experience, we come forth "alive to God in Christ" (V.11) and "free from sin's claims" (V.7) through the blood of Jesus.

The gift of God's grace, through Jesus, saves us from the power and penalty of sin. Sin can no longer dominate our lives because we belong to Christ. "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there." (Galatians 5:24) Since we have been liberated from sin and have become slaves to God, we gladly, freely and naturally bear the sanctifying fruits of the Spirit, the fruits of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23).

Jesus, our creator, came into this world as a babe, took on himself our human form so as to release us from the bondage of sin and the condemnation of the accuser. The Son of God, who is the Truth declares, " you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . . So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free." (John 8:32, 36) Let the reality of that freedom sink into our souls and then flourish into a growing gratitude of honour and praise to our liberating Lord. Ours is the privilege to walk the Highway of Holiness with Him.

"He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns." 1 Corinthians 1:8

In His Light

"*I will say to the prisoners, 'Come out in freedom,' and to those in darkness, 'Come into the light.' They will be my sheep, grazing in green pastures and on hills that were previously bare.*" Isaiah 49:9

Christ came to rescue us from the darkness of despair, from the shackles of sin and the dungeon of denial. He calls to the prisoners of pride to pull down the barricades of self-defence and 'Come out in freedom' to the pristine green pastures of the Good Shepherd. And to those of us whose understanding has been darkened by deceptions and delusions, who have been blindfolded by willing ignorance or blinkered by the traditions of men, He who is the light of the world says, 'come into the light'.

Let the rays of God's love and truth, the dawn of a new day, penetrate the darkness of our deepest doubts, banish the shadows of disbelief and provide a panoramic vision of God's glorious plan for us as we venture into the healing, life-giving light of the Sun of righteousness.

Come, let us walk with the Word made flesh, let us live in the light of His love, let us find certainty in the reassuring rays of His presence and glory in all His grace and goodness "which shines ever brighter until the full light of day" (Proverbs 4:18). Then the words of Graham Kendrick's song can be ours:-

Lord, the light of your love is shining
In the midst of the darkness, shining
Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us
Set us free by the truth you now bring us
Shine on me, shine on me.
Shine, Jesus, shine . . . and let there be light."

"Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD!" (Isaiah 2:5)

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